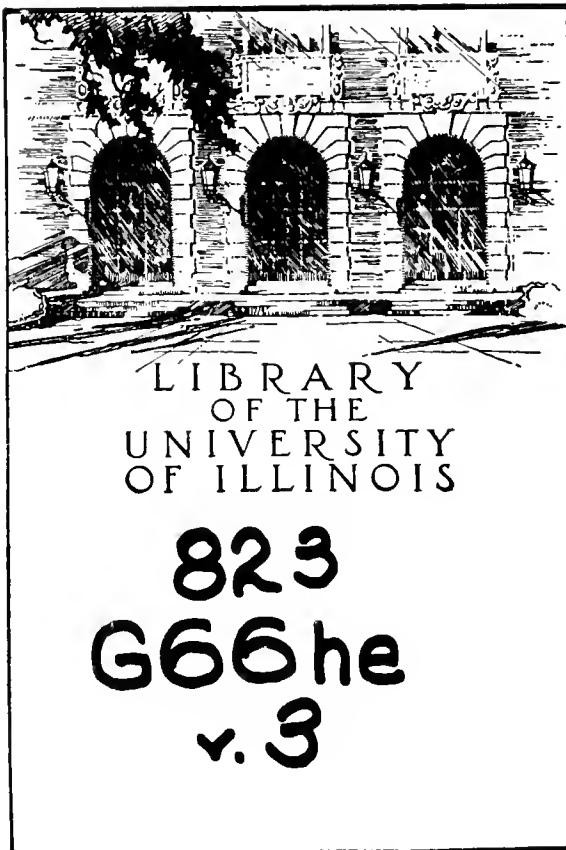


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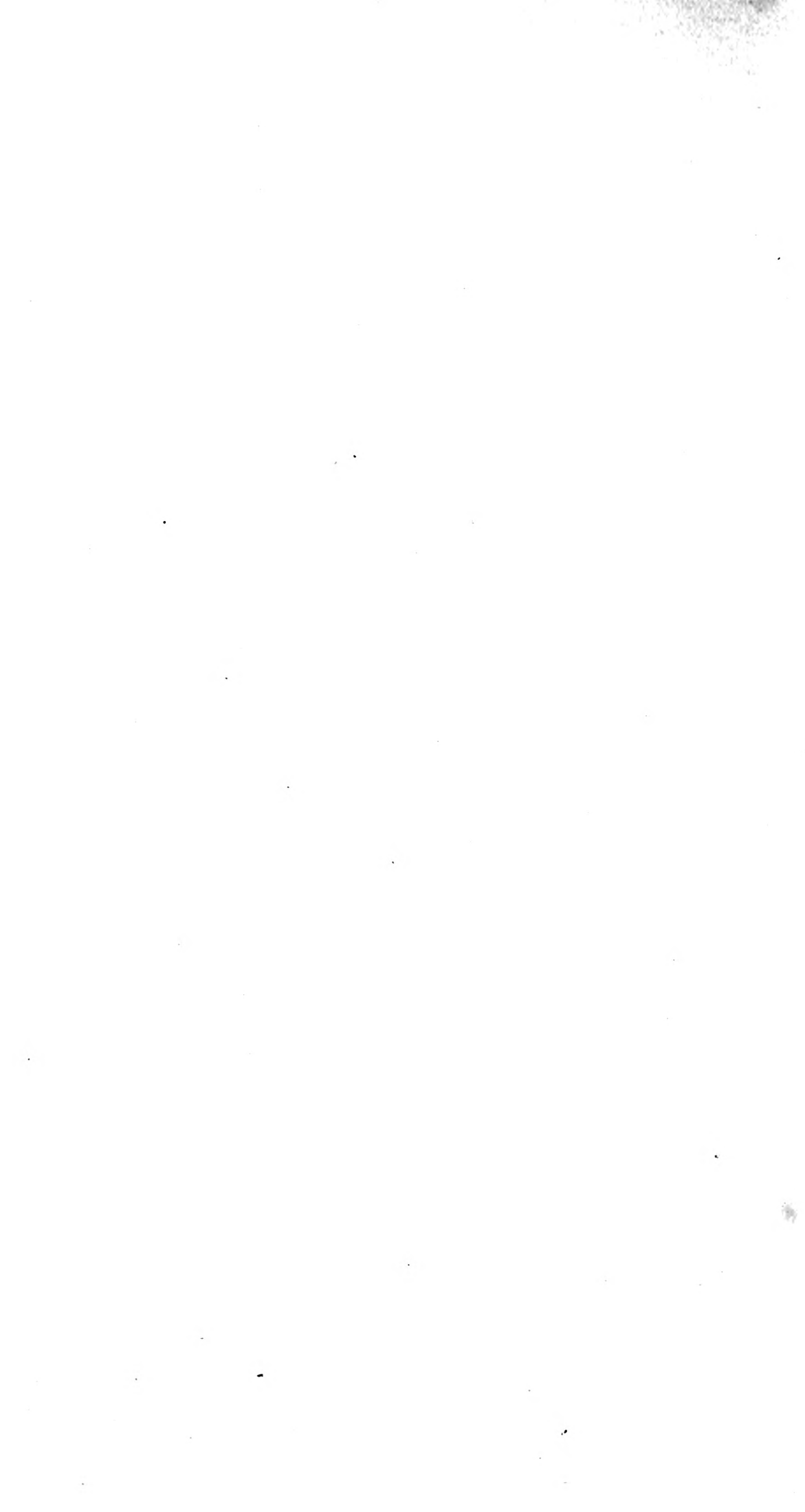
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THE
HEIR OF SELWOOD:

OR,
THREE EPOCHS OF A LIFE.

BY THE AUTHORESS OF
"MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS," "MRS. ARMYTAGE,"
AND "STOKESHILL PLACE."

"LEON. How now, boy?

MAM. I am *like* you, they say.

LEON. Why, that's some comfort!"

WINTER'S TALE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
HENRY COLBURN, PUBLISHER,
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THE HEIR OF SELWOOD.

CHAPTER I.

O she that hath a heart of that fine frame
To pay this debt of love but to a brother,
How will she love, when the rich golden shaft
Hath kill'd the flock of all affections else
That live in her?

SHAKSPEARE.

THE mother of an only daughter, endowed with excellence, beauty, and fortune, is seldom anxious to be deprived of her company by an early marriage. To lose her beloved Constance,—her late-born Constance,—her faultless Constance,—was a thing Lady Norman had hitherto contemplated with terror. But *now*, she felt suddenly anxious that her daughter should form

a suitable attachment. Before they quitted Tuxwell Park, the Marquis of St. Aubyn made formal proposals for her hand; and though Lady Norman was conscious of the improbability that his unformed manner and unaccomplished mind should have produced a favourable impression, she was almost disappointed by the positiveness of Constance's refusal. Miss Norman said not a word to conciliate the wounded maternal love of the Marchioness, or the self-love of her son; merely stating that her home at Selwood was too happy to admit of any desire of change.

“But your brother will marry, my dear Miss Norman,” remonstrated Lady St. Aubyn, “and what will your home be *then*?”

“Still happy, I trust,” replied Constance with a smile; but Lady Norman fancied that it was shaded by a cast of uneasiness. It was in vain the two mothers represented the excellence of Lord St. Aubyn's temper and principles, and the privileges of his high condition. Constance would not hear of him. She did not want to be a peeress. She was not covetous of castles or

diamond necklaces ; and as to the young man's personal merits,

What was mere good-nature but a fool ?

Sir Frederick Cranstoun's attentions also evidently contemplated a serious declaration. But with all Lady Norman's anxiety to secure the destinies of Constance, it was not to a fashionable profligate she wished to sacrifice her child ; and his proposals were accordingly forestalled by the most repulsive coldness. It was to *him*, nevertheless, that Lady St. Aubyn attributed the ill success of her son. The young marquis being too carefully guarded by her vigilance to become the dupe of the listless clique, nothing had remained for Lord Charles and his friends but to turn him to account as a butt. His awkwardness, his *mauvaise honte*, his effeminacy, his wretched horsemanship, his quizzical toilet, afforded them constant themes for wit and merriment ; and though Lady Louisa Farleigh and her sister had reasons of their own for not joining in the laugh, Constance was more than once betrayed by high spirits and inexperience

of the world, into a smile. She saw with what readiness Walter had in his own case turned upon the offenders the battery of their impertinence; and consequently accused Lord St. Aubyn of imbecility for being so easily overcrowded.

A week afterwards, as the Normans were discussing round the Avesfords' cheerful fireside at Fern Hill, the pomps and vanities of Tuxwell Park, Constance was reproved by her mother for having even *appeared* to sanction the *persiflage* of Lord Charles and Sir Frederick.

"You have very little idea," said Lady Norman, "of the pain inflicted upon a timid person by the irony of a coterie."

"But you saw, dearest mother, how quickly their impertinence was silenced by the good sense of Walter," cried Miss Norman.

"Not altogether, by my good sense," interrupted her brother, with a laugh. "Guess to what I owed my impunity from their attacks?—To my cousinship with a certain Captain Norman of the guards, whom I never beheld; and who, it seems, is *one of theirs*."

“ Lord Mornington’s son ?” demanded Lady Norman, with an air of embarrassment.

“ Precisely. The moment our relationship was explained, they became my most obedient, humble servants ; and Lord Charles has undertaken to make a man of me,—that is, a man about town,—whenever I choose to be put up at clubs or down in visiting lists.”

“ Lord Charles Bartley made rather a good speech in the house last season,” observed Avesford. “ But except that the devil can quote scripture for his purpose, it is incomprehensible where he came by his principles !—A born and bred tory, idle, dissolute, and vain, preaching reform and retrenchment,—is an anomaly.”

“ Private experience has perhaps enlarged his public views,” said Mrs. Avesford.

“ I fear his views are those of his interest rather than his conscience,” said her husband. “ He backs the winning horse. There is as much jockeyship in public life as in any other career ; and when I find a man professing public opinions six thousand degrees purer and more enlightened than those of his personal practice,

I have a right to doubt his sincerity. Lord Charles's politics are probably those of the constituents who keep him out of the King's Bench, and may eventually promote him to a place;—for why should he protect, as a legislator, the welfare of the people whom he defrauds as a debtor, and despises as a dandy?—I cannot reconcile so much public virtue with so much private vice.”

“Nevertheless,” remonstrated Sir Walter, “patriots have in all ages emerged from the school of Epicurus. The myrtle has been torn from more than one enervate brow, to give place to the mural crown.”

“Never—unless where generous and manly qualities were pre-existent,” cried Avesford. “With the exception of hazarding their necks in a fox-chase, what manliness is exhibited by the pitiful class of modern exquisites?—What is there frank, fair, or honest, about their community?—Listen to the details of their money transactions, *not* with Jews and usurers, but with each other.—Look to the yearly events of the turf—the gaming table—nay, to the common

transfer of a hunter from one to another. Was there ever such barefaced indifference to the rules of integrity?—such base desertion of the chivalrous associations of their order?—They may talk of radical meetings and democratic writings, my dear Norman, but the higher classes of this kingdom are never so wantonly degraded in the eyes of the people as by themselves:—‘by their works ye shall know them.’”

“Lord Farleigh seems an amiable man,” observed Sir Walter; “respectable in private life, and conscientious in public.”

“I cannot call a man conscientious in public life,” said Avesford, “who is a stone-deaf enemy to improvement, and a vociferous stifler of inquiry. Men of Lord Farleigh’s caste have so much to lose by every popular reform, that delicacy should forbid them to be clamorous against measures ensuring the welfare of millions at the expense of a personal sacrifice. Were they to exhibit on any private question the rapacious tenacity they do not scruple to avow in the great national struggle, they would

be scouted as shabby fellows. Attack the legality of their tenure of any portion of their private property, and they will answer, ‘ Search, examine; if my claims prove defective, I am ready to renounce them.’—Why be less honourable in their mode of dealing with the demands of the people?”

“ By the way, dear mother,” cried Walter, “ I can scarcely express to you the kindness and distinction I received in Paris from your friend, Guerchant, the *Ministre de la Marine*. It was to *him* I was indebted for my private introduction at the château, and the favours shewn me by the King. Gracious as Louis Philippe shews himself to all the English, his mode of receiving me at Neuilly was an exception in honour of the friendship of the Guerchants.”

“ They were always kind and excellent people,” said Lady Noiman, in a low voice. “ No man do I respect more highly than Admiral Guerchant.”

“ The old gentleman was rather indignant, however, to find that you had never named him to me as my godfather. In France, you know,

the tie of sponsorship is held twice as sacred as in England," observed Sir Walter.

"The disastrous moment at which the rite was solemnized,—my own absence,—the difference of religious worship between us,"—faltered Lady Norman, "rendered me perhaps blameably negligent; but surely I have frequently cited the Guerchants to you as partial friends of your father and of myself?"

"Say, rather, most *faithful*," replied Sir Walter. "You should hear the old Admiral do justice to your courage and presence of mind when abiding my birth in the midst of the idle rumours raised by the English as a pretext for their cowardly flight. By the way, his daughter, the Duchesse de Barjac, insisted upon taking me to the old Château de St. Sylvain, where I was born."

"And did you really visit the place?"—demanded Constance, deeply interested in details which the habitual reserve of Lady Norman had hitherto enveloped in mystery.

"Only the gardens—the terraces and *charmilles* of which are still in good preservation :

but the house is converted into a manufactory ; and though I went over it, there was nothing to point out the memorable chamber in which so eminent a personage as Walter Norman saw the light. I was assured that there was an old woman in the village, a Madame Gervy or Jarvais, or some such name, who had been formerly in the service of an English family at St. Sylvain.—Do you remember such a person ?”—said he, suddenly turning towards Lady Norman.

“ So many painful reminiscences are attached to that period,” faltered she, pale as death, and scarcely able to articulate, “ that I find no pleasure in reverting to it.”

“ Let us say no more, then,” cried Sir Walter ; “ but admit, dear mother, that I was fully justified in making a pilgrimage to a spot, where I entered upon the life which your affection has rendered so happy.”

Constance, with glistening eyes, glanced from the pale face of Lady Norman to the earnest countenance of her brother, feeling that some reply was due to the fervency and grace of his appeal ; but her mother answered not a word.

Matilda kept at all times a conscientious watch over her lips, lest she should aggravate by hypocrisy the fault with which she evermore upbraided herself; preferring rather to be reviled as lukewarm in her maternal affections, than affect towards Walter the passionate tenderness of a mother.

“Now I come to consider the case, my dear Walter,” observed Avesford,—his thoughts being thus accidentally led back to the peculiarities of his nephew’s foreign birth,—“it may become hereafter important to you to have a copy of the registry of your baptism. I recommend you to apply to Admiral Guerchant to have an *acte de naissance* properly made out. Can you remember exactly where the registry took place?”—he continued, addressing his sister-in-law.

“Probably at St. Sylvain.—Sir Richard undertook the whole arrangement.—”

“The first time I am with you again at Selwood, we will search your poor father’s memorandum book for some allusion to the event,” said Avesford to his ward. “We may find the

certificate among his papers; if not, you can write to the Admiral. He will not mind taking a little trouble for the son of his friend; and if the old woman you heard of were really a household servant of the family, she might be able to put him on the right scent."

"I have commissions to execute for Madame de Barjac," said Sir Walter. "On forwarding them, I will beg the Admiral to procure me in return the necessary papers."

The subject was dropped in deference to the presence of the widow, in whom it appeared to revive unpleasant recollections; but from Lady Norman's mind, it was not so easily dismissed. That Walter should have been upon the eve of an interview with Madame Gervais,—even on that fatal spot,—the scene of her connivance in fraud,—the old woman, probably sinking into that feebleness of years, from whose weakness or compunction confession is so easily obtained,—filled her with consternation. The fine open character of the young man forbade all suspicion that more had transpired in his visit to the Château, than he had avowed; but might

not the inquiry so inopportunately suggested by Mr. Avesford lead to further exposures,—perhaps to the discovery of the truth?—

In every way she was miserable!—To behold the impostor constantly before her, with Constance in his arms, was a vexation her patience could scarcely support; or, on the other hand, to have the truth discovered,—the imposture detected,—her own honour, her husband's memory, disgraced beyond retrieval,—was a trial still more alarming. The punishment of Lady Norman's fault seemed to hang daily heavier upon her life. She had formerly hoped that time would habituate her to her false position; but experience taught her that time has no narcotic for the restlessness of an evil conscience.

She rose, the day succeeding this painful conversation, trusting that the whole might have already passed from the memory of Walter; upon whom the pleasures and duties of life were exercising such varied influence. Amid the flurry of attaining his majority and entering his public career, Admiral Guerchant, St. Sylvain,

and the *extrait de baptême*, might possibly escape his recollection.

But on that very day, arose a source of anxiety of a more painful nature. The infirm son of the Avesfords, attaching and attached as such helpless beings often prove, was suddenly attacked by a spasmodic illness of the most alarming nature. In hopeless grief, the parents hung over the couch of the little sufferer; and Lady Norman and her daughter congratulated themselves that they were on the spot to alleviate the trials of the tender and distracted mother. Though every friend to whom the Avesfords were dear had long indulged in an opinion that the release of the sickly boy would be a mercy to themselves and *him*, yet when the moment of removal drew near, one and all indulged in prayers that the blow might be suspended. There was such intensity of affection between the parents and the poor boy, whose wistful eyes looked up to them with looks of love, that no one could bear to anticipate the moment when those eyes must close for ever,

and the joy of parental love cease to brighten the tenour of their days !—

The medical attendants who, having tended the ailing child from infancy, seemed to approach his sick-chamber with more pitying faces than the couch of many a more important patient, shook their heads when they saw the feeble frame racked by these new symptoms of disease. The danger was not immediate, but they feared it was irremediable.

“I must be off for town to-morrow,” said Avesford, falteringly, to young Norman, the evening after this decree of the physicians had gone forth. “I am pledged to my constituents to be present at the debate of Thursday.”

“Pledged before you could anticipate this sad crisis in your family”—interposed Sir Walter.

“Pledged, as we pledge ourselves at the altar, for better for worse,—in sickness or in health !”—replied Avesford, with assumed composure. “My duty calls me to my post.—God forbid that, in self-commiseration, I should sacrifice

the interests of which I have made myself the depositary !”

“ Nevertheless, the imminent danger of an only child——”

“ The danger I am assured is *not* imminent ; and were it so, my presence here would avail nothing to its removal,”—replied the father with quivering lips. “ It is only for the assuagement of my own anxiety that I desire to remain ; and what are *my* feelings compared with the great progress of constitutional reform ?—I must go, my dear Walter !—Do me only the favour to relinquish your pleasures when I dare not relinquish my duty. Remain here to counsel and comfort poor Charles’s unhappy mother !”

Walter Norman pressed the hand extended towards him, and found that it was cold as death. There were no tears in the eyes of Avesford. He evidently did not choose to be seen of men unmanned by a domestic affliction. But it was not the sternness of the stoic, beneath whose cloak the fox is gnawing ; for immediately afterwards, in attending to the

sorrows of his wife, his voice became broken and unintelligible.

He went;—and young Norman fulfilled his promise of filling in the house the place of the absent master. But his presence in the sick-chamber, where no word was to be spoken, no movement to be hazarded, proved a restraint; and Mrs. Avesford would not hear of his paying them more than occasional visits. It was enough to engross the constant companionship of Lady Norman;—Constance and Walter were too young to be afflicted by the continual spectacle of grief and pain.

“Make your sister ride and walk with you as usual, my dear boy,” said she, to her nephew, “and you will relieve me from one source of anxiety. Constance is delicate. The spectacle of my poor child’s sufferings is too much for her. Persuade her to accompany you every morning to the water-side. The sea-air will re-invigorate and support her.”

Walter readily promised, and readily performed. It was impossible for Lady Norman to raise objections to a scheme so natural. Yet

every day, when their absence grew longer and longer, and their cheeks more flushed on their return with health and happiness, she entertained a wilder fear that they took too much pleasure in each other's company.

Yet what could be more natural than that Constance, hitherto estranged from companionship of her own age, should rejoice in the society of one to whom her hoard of innocent reflections might be unfolded !—Between familiar friends, nothing conduces to more unreserved communication than a solitary walk ;—

No eye to watch, and no tongue to wound them,
All earth forgot, and all heaven around them ;

no restraint upon the joyous talk, with which in their gayer moments Walter called forth the laughter of his sister ; or upon the tears of affection, with which, in a softer hour, Constance described to her brother the mild, forbearing, tender governance of their mother during his absence on the continent. The young man had a thousand curious anecdotes to relate, and customs to describe, of the various lands he had visited. Like most persons whose

education is completed abroad, he possessed the talent of narration ; was not afraid of hearing his own voice ; not ashamed of trying to interest others in that which had interested himself. Italy, Greece, Germany, Denmark, Russia, supplied his memory with a thousand amusing traits and beautiful landscapes, which he delighted to describe when he saw how eagerly Constance listened to the description.

The heavy eyes and saddened countenance with which she emerged from the house of mourning, gradually gave place to the invigorating impulses of youth and joy ; and fresh colours bloomed on her cheeks,—fresh spirits beamed in her eyes,—while, leaning on his arm, she forgot both time and place in the details of his varied conversation. Every walk became the precursor of another. They descried new objects to be visited,—new landscapes explored ;—the tide was to be up at such an hour, or the sands at low-water were to afford them new ground for enjoyment.

Nor was the discourse of the young Normans always of a frivolous nature. The afflicting

scene from which they emerged into the enjoyment of the open atmosphere and the contemplation of the beauties of nature, sobered their gaiety. Both were beginning to conceive opinions and reform their principles, according to their opening insight into the ways of the world; and these were to be compared, argued, adapted, or rejected, between them. Walter became almost affected when by degrees the secret sanctuary of his sister's golden thoughts and pious feelings was unveiled to his view:—his arguments were silenced,—his eyes dazzled,—for he saw that the place whereon he stood was holy ground. Even his anxiety to strengthen her mind by a more steadfast view of the harsh realities of life, gave place to his reverence for a purity of spirit, on which, as on the saintly one described by Milton as dear to Heaven,—

A thousand liveried angels wait,
To lackey its desires.

Constance had, in fact, a serious object at heart. The difference of faith which seemed to divide her immortal soul from that of her bro-

ther was an obstacle to her happiness. She knew that, by their father's will, Walter was to be reared a Catholic ; but that no impediment was to be placed upon a change of faith arising from conviction. That conviction, she dearly longed to secure. She perceived that his long residence at Rome had opened the eyes of her brother to absurdities and abuses, which it was easy to place in a still stronger light ; and though deeply conscious of her incapacity for the task of conversion, she possessed more advantages than she was aware of. There was no irony, no mockery, in her gentle pleading,—no assumption of authority,—no pretence at wisdom. She spake neither with the tongue of men nor angels ; but with the gentle tongue of woman,—a voice, when lawfully employed, how all-convincing !—Those truths which the mildest of mothers had impressed upon her own veneration, the mildest of sisters strove to impress upon that of her brother.

Sir Walter listened in silence ; if not convinced by her arguments, touched by her eloquence. Often when she had ceased speaking

he longed to entreat her to begin again, that he might once more revere the sweetness of soul suggesting such just and heart-riving expressions. Though they sometimes prolonged their walk to the hour when a winter sunset reddened the sky and the twilight damps of the shrubberies softened the air, yet on reaching the hall-door he would invite her to take another turn. It was so much more agreeable to have Constance leaning on his arm and soothing him with her gentle philosophy, than to return to the contemplation of unassuageable pain and unconsolable grief!—

On such occasions Lady Norman became almost harsh in her reproof of their truancy.—What right had Sir Walter to hazard the health of his sister by exposure to the evening dew?—What motive to induce her to loiter by the shore when storms were blowing up, and snow or rain impending?—If Constance had so wild a propensity to contemplate at any cost the phenomena of nature, it was her brother's duty to oppose her indiscretion.

Walter was wonderstruck on perceiving with

how strange an expression of countenance these remonstrances were delivered by his usually gentle mother. The first time she had occasion to repeat her reproofs, her eyes sparkled and her colour went and came with emotion. Yet as they were standing in the anteroom adjoining the sick-chamber of poor little Charles, she could not indulge in a full avowal of her displeasure.

Again, however, the offence was renewed; for Lady Norman's limitations of their walks began to be unreasonable. She soon decided that they must not outstep the boundary of the pleasure grounds; and as these limits unluckily extended to the ascent of a craggy cliff from whence a splendid marine view, with all its variations of light and shade, was discoverable, Constance and her brother found it impossible to resist, one evening, their desire to view the setting sun from that elevated spot. On their return, they learned that Lady Norman had been inquiring for them; and on entering her room, found her in tears,—the severest rebuke they had yet received. Kneeling before her,

Constance promised not to offend again ; but she framed her promise in terms of such absolute disposal over the movements of Sir Walter, that Lady Norman experienced a still deeper wound from her submission.

Even pre-occupied as she was, Lady Norman's susceptibility could not wholly escape the observation of Mrs. Avesford ; and she fancied that sympathy in *her* affliction disturbed the even temper of Matilda. Many people seem out of humour when out of spirits. But Lady Norman's disposition was not of this unreasonable class. She was usually forbearing, humane, gentle ; and Mrs. Avesford at length began to apprehend that some unexplained calamity was weighing on her mind. Walter might have formed some unworthy attachment, or Constance oppose some girlish obstacle to prospects of establishment which her mother was not at liberty to reveal.

One day, when little Charles, after hours of protracted torment, had fallen into a gentle slumber, rendering it prudent for those who were watching to repair to the adjoining room, the

two sisters sat beside the window ; Mrs. Avesford with a book in her hand which she was not reading ; Lady Norman with work in hers, over which her tears were falling while she pretended to work.

“ My dearest Matty,”—said the former, extending her hand towards her sister’s knee, after watching her for some minutes in silence.—“ Why deny me the joy of comforting your troubles ?—God knows—*my* only consolation is in the solace you afford to mine.”

But Lady Norman, though she pressed convulsively the hand extended towards her, remained silent. To rally her spirits or chide back her tears, was impossible ;—to admit their origin, equally out of the question.

“ You have something on your mind,” pursued Mrs. Avesford ; and what can weigh on a mind like yours, unfit to be confided to a friend ?—”

Still Lady Norman replied not. A profound sigh alone admitted the truth of her sister’s assertion.

“Dare I vex you, my dear sister,” continued Mrs. Avesford, “I could almost upbraid you for trifling with the blessings of Providence. Consider the gifts you enjoy!—Health, prosperity, and the love of two noble children, who have grown to maturity under your eyes, in goodness, beauty, and intelligence,—all that the heart of a parent can desire!—Reflect upon the difference of your fate and mine!—The comfort of my future years concentrated in the poor, frail, tormented being suffering in yonder bed;—his utmost happiness, respite from pain,—his habitual existence, torture!—Yet even with this affliction ever before me, I do not dare repine! I should fear that some misfortune might overtake my husband in retribution of my ingratitude.”

“I admit that I am unreasonable,” replied Lady Norman, attempting to rally her spirits. “I expect impossible things, in requiring that the heart over whose opening qualities I have watched for eighteen years, should remain exclusively my own. I was wrong not to calculate

upon the influence of time,—the influence of others.—”

“ You do not surely mean that you are jealous of Constance’s affection for her brother ?”—cried Mrs. Avesford, fancying herself suddenly enlightened. “ Oh ! my dearest sister ! beware how you embitter your happy existence by such weakness—such wickedness !—Forgive me !” added she, as she saw the tears steal once more down the pale cheeks of Lady Norman ; “ but I love you so dearly, Matty, that I tremble at the idea of your estranging your children’s affections by overexaction. Never was there so sweet—so loving a creature as that girl of yours ! Constance worships the print of your footsteps in the dust. But would it be natural to love less tenderly the brother with whom she has been brought up in tender, sisterly affection ?—I should detest Constance if she did not prefer her brother to every living being beside yourself ; and detest Walter if he did not fully return her affection. Avesford is always in admiration of the intensity of their mutual attachment.”

Lady Norman shuddered.—“It is impossible, said she, “for any human being to place himself in the position of another, however close their habits of intimacy. Walter and Constance, on the eve of forming attachments and engagements that must ensure their separation, cannot add to their happiness by cultivating a regard that may prove offensive to the husband or wife of either. Had *I* affected for a brother of my own age the enthusiasm which my poor girl cherishes for hers, it would have been the cause of serious estrangements between Norman and myself.”

“Sir Richard Norman was an exception to most rules in the conduct of his domestic affairs,” remonstrated Elizabeth. “Forgive me, therefore, if I entreat you not to discover to your children the jealousy you have avowed to *me*. One remonstrance of the kind to Constance would create reserves between you,—alienate her confidence from her mother, and redouble her love for Walter!—Believe me——”

A deep moan interrupted a colloquy which might perhaps have led to wider disclosure. In

a moment, Mrs. Avesford was by the sick-bed of her child ; anticipating the wishes, and soothing the unexpressed anguish, of the patient boy by the tenderest endearments and exhortations.

CHAPTER II.

C'est mon monde à moi ;—un monde de rubans et de manchettes !

M. DE SENNETERRE.

LORD FARLEIGH'S family was now settled in London for the season, preparing for the opening campaign ; and just as his lordship expected to find every succeeding November, in trying his favourite coverts, double the sport of the preceding hunting-season, his lordship's wife and daughters seemed to fancy that fresh pleasures were to be found in their favourite resorts of balls and operas. Not that Lady Farleigh was a finessing mamma. Too indolent for any exertion of the kind, her pet fancy-work and pet lap-dog monopolized her attention ; the young ladies on

whose education had been expended such a prodigious outlay of governesses and masters, being by this time, it was to be hoped, capable of taking care of themselves. There could be no doubt that proper alliances would come in search of the two good-looking daughters of an Earl, who gave such good dinners and professed so thoroughly the good old creed of toryism.

Lady Louisa, however, was by no means satisfied at the tardiness of their arrival. She was too fully persuaded of her merits not to feel indignant at having been outrivalled with the Marquis of St. Aubyn, in her father's own particular country-house, and with all the appliances and means of conquest to boot, by a simple country-girl like Constance Norman. An object of flattery from her birth,—grandmothers, nurses, waiting-maids, governesses, masters, had united to inflate her young mind into overweening self-esteem. The claims of others she had never heard brought into competition with hers; and piqued by the unexpected discovery that there were other feet besides her own at which the indiscriminating world might be tempted to

bow, the mortified beauty ran some risk of throwing herself away in marriage, to prove to her aged flatterers and youthful competitors, that she need not be an old maid like her aunt Lady Emily Farleigh,—whose red nose and attempts at juvenility were favourite objects of derision to Lord Selsdon and his sisters. She was ready to flirt with Sir Frederick Cranstoun or Captain Norman, or any of the *attachés* of any of the foreign embassies, in order to mark to old Lady St. Aubyn her utter contempt of the desertion of her son.

Lady Sophia, on the other hand, having survived by a season her loss of Lord Meldrum, was not insensible to the merits of the handsome young Baronet of Selwood, the generous donor of Parisian cadeaux, whose fine eyes and fine estate were powerful in the scale even against the fine gentlemanism of Lord Charles Bartley.—She soon found a thousand pretexts for her predilection.—Sir Walter was an old acquaintance,—their parents were still older friends.—Her brother would be delighted with his manly spirit, and her father with the rent-roll of his

estates. Sir Walter had informed her, indeed, that he disliked the *grand monde*, and had no thoughts of visiting London. But this flat blasphemy had been uttered during the hunting-season,—a period of the year when few young men know how to appreciate any object on earth but a fox's brush. Lady Sophia was, therefore, still on the look-out for his arrival at Mivart's or Fenton's; and in the hope of accelerating his movements, addressed the following letter to her friend Miss Norman; a fair specimen of the style of young ladylike correspondence which absorbs such reams of satin paper, and so materially augments the revenues of Her Majesty's Post Office.

“ Hill Street, March 2nd.

“ We are greatly concerned, my dearest Constance, to receive no announcement of Lady Norman's removal to town for the season; mamma having always conceived that she would not delay your presentation at court beyond the present year. I entreat you, *ma chérissime*, to

write us word that your visit is only deferred till after Easter.

“ Indeed, my dear, you ought to be already in the field. We had our second ball last night at Almack’s (the first we never attend, for fear of being accused of airing the rooms); and I assure you that, for the time of year, the thing was tolerable enough. One had all the new *débutantes* to see and criticise; all the new foreigners to learn the names of; to admire the verdure of the Marchioness’s old green satin gown, which comes into new leaf every spring; and the yellowness of certain white crape gowns, which have travelled to Yorkshire, Cornwall, Scotland, or Ireland, and back again since last season. By the way, pray inform Sir Walter, that Musard’s orchestra favoured us with one of those divine waltzes of Lanner’s which he brought from Paris; and I enjoyed it as a reminiscence of our charming little sociable evenings at Tuxwell Park. Often, dearest Constance, *very* often, may we enjoy a recurrence of those friendly interchanges of thought and feeling.

“Pale blue is decidedly the colour of the season; and will you believe that the heavy silk, *grosgrain*, is worn in preference to satin or any lighter material. Imagine poor Lady Mary Clare, (as *blême* in complexion as a white mouse, or your Bath Miss the beauty of the Avonwell Forges,) pretending to dance in a half-train dress of the palest blue gros de Naples! Lord Charles Bartley kept protesting she looked like a Bengal light; and, without being ill-natured, the effect was really *pitoyable*.—But I forget that I must not address this criticism to my dear Constance. That lovely pale blue *mousseline de soie*, which Sir Walter brought you from Paris, has been ever since my standard of perfection.—*A propos*—how strange that so old-fashioned a material as *grosgrain* should come in again; it *must* be the “grogram” alluded to in the Vicar of Wakefield!—*Qu’en dites vous?*”

“I had a charming *contredanse* last night, with your impertinent cousin, little Captain Norman. He is really the most original, as well as the most conceited creature in London.

Think of his writing an official letter last season to that inveterate slave of the ring—that untirable gravel-grinder—Lady —— (as if from the Ranger of the parks) proposing, for the advantage of the community, to affix a water-cart to the rear of her ladyship’s carriage, which is rarely known to quit the drive; and the other day, when Lord Mornington’s new liveries came home for the drawing-room, he packed them up and sent them by the omnibus into the city, addressed to the Lord Mayor,—protesting that they were too fine for anything but a shrievalty. He is always getting into scrapes!—It is a pity that they are not redeemed by certain personal characteristics of the Norman family. But one seldom sees so distinguished-looking a person as your brother. Captain Norman, *entre nous*, declares himself very curious to renew his acquaintance. When are his wishes to be gratified? *Repondez, ma toute aimable,—repondez, repondez,—*and persuade Lady Norman to commission mamma to engage a house for her. *Adieu donc, et à revoir.* We look anxiously for

news of you ;—and, with united regards to the *adorabilissima madre*, (not forgetting Sir Walter,) I am, dear Constance,

Votre toute dévouée,

SOPH.”

Most inopportune was the arrival of this flip-pant epistle at Fern Hill, whither it was forwarded from Selwood Park. The Normans were occupied with the details of a death-bed ; and Constance threw it half perused aside, that she might relieve her mother in her watch with the sorrowing parents of the dying boy.

Avesford, having discharged his duty heroically in the great debate where the influence of his eloquence was required, had now paired off with some gouty idler, and returned to support the sinking spirit of his wife, and sustain, in its last agonies, the beloved child passing through momentary clouds to eternal sunshine.

The little family circle was overwhelmed with sadness. The Avesfords were too generally beloved for their silent affliction not to command a

sympathy rarely accorded to vociferous grief. There was something inexpressibly affecting in the thoughtful tenderness with which the expiring child struggled against his torments to spare the feelings of his parents; and in the inquiring, bewildered look which, during the last night of his existence, overspread his little wasted, waxen face, as if awed by the sense of dawning peace, and perplexed with the thought of coming immortality!—Avesford sat silent by the bedside holding the hands of his wife, while he watched the exhaling breath of his only child.—Not a murmur escaped his compressed lips; but those who were standing near him noted from the visible pulsation of his temples, how terrible a strife of anguish was passing within.

At length, Constance, unable longer to support the tension of feeling caused by this prolonged wretchedness, crept from the chamber, and took refuge in the library to give unrestrained course to her tears; and Sir Walter, noticing that Lady Norman's position beside the child forbade her to follow, hastened after his

sister, whose pale face announced indisposition as well as distress. Sir Walter led her to the library sofa, reclining on which, a burst of tears relieved her overcharged heart. The afflicted girl was in no condition to take note of the passing minutes, while she sat concealing her face upon her brother's bosom. Her thoughts were raised in prayer to Heaven;—prayer that mercy might be shewn to the expiring child, as well as to his sad survivors,—prayer that absorbed every sense and every faculty,—till she was startled by the voice of her mother severely addressing her.

“Is this a time, Constance,” cried Lady Norman, “to mark your indifference to my wishes?—Return with me to your family—you must not, you shall not, remain here.”

“My dearest mother,” interposed Sir Walter, apprehending from the wildness of her air and address, that affliction had disturbed her reason, “sit down, I beseech you, a moment, and compose yourself. Constance will take your place for a time in the sick room.—You need refresh-

ment—you need rest.—I will not have you sit up another night.”

“ *You* will not have me !” cried Lady Norman, half frantic on perceiving that he did not even withdraw his arm from the waist of Constance.

“ You are not equal to these exertions,” he continued, in a soothing tone. “ Were my uncle and Mrs. Avesford less engrossed by their miseries, they would feel the impropriety of so severely taxing the strength of two delicate women like you and Constance. See !”—cried he, drawing Miss Norman closer to his bosom, “ she is still trembling and exhausted ; while as to yourself, mother, I scarcely seem to recognise your countenance !—nay, compose yourself, I entreat you.”

Lady Norman was indeed in a state of strange excitement. Overpowered by her efforts throughout the day to repress her feelings, her face was almost convulsed as she stood witnessing the endearments passing between Constance and her brother. But at that moment, an un-

usual stir in the corridor apprized them that some direful event had taken place in the sick-chamber; and Avesford appeared, conducting his almost unconscious wife. "Comfort her!" faltered he, addressing Constance and her mother, as he placed her between them. "All is over. Our poor boy is released!"

But even while administering relief to her afflicted sister, Lady Norman could not refrain from examining the movements of Sir Walter and her daughter, with glances of displeasure and mistrust.

CHAPTER III.

Je meurs ! De leur froide haleine
M'ont touché les sombres autans ;
J'ai vu comme une ombre vaine
S'évanouir mon printemps !
Tombe ! feuille éphémère !
Voile aux yeux ce triste chemin ;
Cache au désespoir de ma mère
La place où je serai demain !

MILLEVOYE:

THE ensuing week, entailing such solemn duties towards the living and the dead, subdued to some degree of composure the perturbed spirit of Lady Norman. So long as the mortal remains of a beloved object abide in a house, a sacred influence seems to predominate within its walls, to the extinction of every human passion !

All that remained to the afflicted parents of the little being to *them* so precious,—so unimportant in the eyes of the world,—the infirm child bestowed upon them in the midst of their strength and prosperity, as if to remind them that their destinies were in the hand of One who was stronger and mightier than they,—having been consigned to the grave, it was decided that the heart-broken Mrs. Avesford should accompany her husband to town, whither he was peremptorily recalled by his parliamentary duties ; while Walter, who had law-business to execute, was to bear them company for a week or two,—his mother and sister returning quietly to Selwood Manor.

This project was a comfort to Lady Norman. She was in fact chiefly instrumental in forming the arrangement. Yet, on finding herself alone in the carriage with Constance, she experienced, for the first time in her life, an unwillingness to be tête-à-tête with her child. The strange violence into which she had been recently betrayed must appear so extraordinary to the gentle girl who had hitherto been treated with

so much mildness and affection !—But Constance was the last of human creatures to resent anything proceeding from her mother. The affliction she had been witnessing had produced so many new perceptions and emotions, that she fancied the momentary alteration of Lady Norman's manner, a consequence of the inexplicable influence of excessive grief. She fancied that her mother's mind had been suddenly distracted at the moment of her nephew's death !—

To refrain, therefore, from expressing herself as usual concerning Walter out of deference to her mother, did not suggest itself to her mind. The journey from Fern Hill to Selwood, was one which at all times exercised a dispiriting influence over the mind of Lady Norman. Though more than sixteen years had elapsed since the loss of her husband, never did she set off from the Avesfords' door towards home, without recalling to mind the day when, proceeding thence for the first time in all the pride of happiness and security, she had been suddenly plunged into the depths of

despair; and Constance, remarking as usual a despondency the motive of which she had long conjectured, fancied that she was doing wisely and kindly, in trying to divert her mother's attention from past sorrows by directing it towards her present sources of joy.

“I wonder whether Walter will keep his promise of being at home next week?”—said she, after they had performed nearly half the journey in silence.

“I trust you do not wish him to quit poor Avesford and my sister, so long as his company appears a comfort to them?”—replied her mother, coldly.

“Perhaps it might be better for them to be compelled into society with persons whose company would be a greater restraint than Walter's. My brother is so attached to them both,—so full of sympathy for their sorrows,—so gentle and affectionate in his manners,—and was himself so fond of that poor little fellow,—that he will only assist them in cherishing their grief! For their sakes, therefore, as well as ours, I think he will be better at Selwood.”

“ But not for *his*,”—said Lady Norman. “ It is time that Walter should learn something of the world.”

“ Surely he has been living in the world for nearly four years past ?”—said Constance, with an air of surprise.

“ Not the English world. The society of England is a thing apart ; and so absolute in its forms and arbitrary in its customs, that a young man brought up like most Roman Catholics, either in retirement or on the continent, labours under disadvantages on his entrance into public life. In Walter’s case, these are increased by a long minority, and the want of family connexion ; and the longer he defers his entrance into the world, the greater will be his difficulties.”

“ But what difficulties await a young man of his position and fortune ?”

“ As he is likely to live among his equals in rank and fortune, these will afford him no distinction.”

“ But his talents,—his manners !—At Tuxwell Park, he was distinguished, not only above

his equals in rank, but his *superiors*.—Observe how popular my brother becomes with every one he speaks to !—”

“ The Farleighs, as old friends of his father, are partial and over-indulgent.”

“ But the Dean of Gloucester was not a friend of poor papa, (I think you told me you had not met before ?)—And I heard the Dean remark to Lady Farleigh that he had never seen a young man of Walter’s age so full of information, yet so diffident and unpresuming.—”

“ The Dean is a violent politician, and may hope to bring Walter over to his side.”

“ Could a high-tory Dean expect to convert the ward of my uncle Avesford ?—But I assure you their conversation was not of a political cast ; for I sat listening to every word, and you know, dear mamma, how I hate politics. When Sir Robert Skaremidge and Mr. Redely dine at Selwood and indulge in their tiresome party squabbles, I have always a headache next day. Whereas Walter and the Dean——”

“ It is extremely ill-bred, my dear, to give precedence to a member of your own family, when coupling the name with that of a stranger.”

“ The Dean and Walter, then, were most entertaining. It seemed natural, however, to assign a priority, in this instance, to my brother, for it was Walter who sustained the conversation. The Dean did little but make inquiries into his observations abroad.”

“ The observations of a young man of Sir Walter’s age !—”

“ I have heard my uncle Avesford say that, as regards simple facts, the perceptions of young people are freshest and most to be trusted.”

“ Perhaps so; but not their digested relation of them. Youth is simply an imitator,—a mere monkey.—There cannot be a greater mistake than to attribute originality to an untutored mind. The faculties which produce originality of character are only developed by time. A man seldom thinks for himself till he is thirty.”

“ But Walter’s studies were so ably directed by Mr. Manningham, and my uncle’s advice

and correspondence have been of so much importance to him !”

“ Your uncle Avesford’s letters, I fancy, were merely letters of business. Avesford is a useful member of society, but he is merely a practical man. I do not conceive Avesford’s mind to be of a superior order.”

On such a point Constance did not presume to argue with her mother. She contented herself with replying in a low voice,—“ *Walter* considers that a man useful to the community is the only true philosopher. My brother says he would give all the speculative wisdom that ever bewildered the brains of mankind, for the consummation of a single useful invention, or public measure.”

“ I have no doubt that the moral and political principles concocted between Sir Walter Norman at one and twenty and Miss Norman at seventeen, are of a highly valuable and important nature,” replied Lady Norman, impatiently. “ But be assured by *me*, Constance, that it sounds as ridiculous in you to become

the expounder of your brother's theories, as it would to hear Sir Walter discussing silks and crewels!"

"But I assure you, mamma," cried Constance, trying to parry this grave reproof by a cheerful retort, "Walter is wonderfully wise in such matters as silks and crewels. It is astonishing what a proficient he became at Paris in the mysteries of the toilet. French *ladies* appear to think that men ought to be interested in even the least of their pursuits. They are not half so much in awe as *we* of the superior wisdom of the lords of the creation."

"Because *their* lords are beings of a more frivolous race," replied her mother; and having now strayed from Sir Walter, during the rest of the journey Lady Norman contrived to restrict the conversation to generalities. On arriving at home, however, she was fated to be again offended.

"How dull we shall find it here now without Walter!" observed Constance, on entering the house.

“ Yet you were cheerful enough, my dear, during your brother’s residence abroad ?”—remonstrated Lady Norman.

“ I knew not then what an addition he was to be to our society. I can scarcely understand, mother, how you bore so patiently with my stupidity during his absence. His return seemed to wake us up from a long dream !”

“ Do not make yourself *too* unhappy at being a week separated from him,” cried Lady Norman, quitting the room. “ He will probably be down next week to flatter and indulge you, and win away your love and confidence from your mother.”

Alas ! it was Lady Norman herself who was doing all in her power to estrange the love and confidence of her child !—Awakened at length to her mother’s jealous susceptibility, Constance resolved to keep watch over every word and action likely to stimulate her jealousy. She refrained from all mention of her brother’s name ; and in silence and solitude, indulged in affectionate longings for the return of one whose society was the delight of her existence.

The Skaremidges soon arrived, as in ceremony bound, to visit the Selwood family on their return home; and never had their tediousness appeared so flat and unprofitable. The Redelys made their appearance, too,—re-opening all the griefs of Lady Norman by ill-bred inquiries touching the painful scenes she had been witnessing. But even this was more supportable than Mrs. Redely's enthusiastic praises of her son.

“Well,—now Sir Walter's away in London,—I suppose I may say what we all think of him!”—cried the lady of the forges, towards the close of her visit. “Upon my honour, your ladyship *has* some right to be proud!—Six feet high, if he's an inch; and quite the high old family look.—You must have his picture done ma'am for the Selwood gallery.—I warrant it won't disgrace it. Amy, my dear, wouldn't Sir Walter Norman make a fine likeness for the Selwood gallery in the uniform of the North Worcester Yeomanry Cavalry, with a corporal behind a-holding in his horse, like the pictures of general officers one sees in the London exhibition?—”

“ The yeomanry cavalry ! ”—retorted Amy with contempt. “ Give me the scarlet uniform of the Tuxwell hunt !—Do you remember, Miss Norman, at the ball at Farleigh Castle, how well they all looked ?—But Lord Selsdon is such a *very* fine young man !—”

“ Lord Selsdon ?—Why he is little better than a schoolboy,” cried Constance, unable to conceive the superiority over her brother imparted in the fair Amy’s estimation by a scarlet coat and a coronet. “ And so coarse, so noisy, so full of slang !—”

“ A trifle too spirity, perhaps,” observed Mrs. Redely. “ But quite the topping sportsman and English nobleman. Redely says, Lord Selsdon has the best seat of his age he ever saw ; and I suppose you read last year, ma’am, of his winning the great pigeon-match at the Red House ?—Pray, is there any likelihood of the family being at the Castle this summer ? ”—she continued, addressing Lady Norman. “ When Lord and Lady Farleigh are down, they make the neighbourhood quite another thing ; and if they were *not* coming till

autumn, Amy's got an invite to Harrogate for June, and Buxton for July, which, maybe, might suit our books as well. You see Amy can't abide being mured up at home, after the gay life she was used to at Bath. It isn't to be expected of young people to be as fond of home as old folks, unless when they hav'nt seen anything pleasanter—as in *your* young lady's case," added Mrs. Redely, intending to be polite to Lady Norman; while Constance endeavoured to make the dashing Amy feel herself at liberty for the summer, by assuring her that the Farleighs had no intention of passing it at the Castle. Thus discouraged, Mrs. Redely fell back upon Sir Walter.

"It's a curious thing enough," said she, "that your ladyship having but two, there should be so little likeness as between Miss Constance and your son;—one so dark, t'other so fair,—one on so large a scale, t'other so slight. Redely was saying that they looked far more like husband and wife than brother and sister. I suppose it comes from one being born in France and t'other in England. After all, may-

be, its best for a young lady to be fair, and a young gentleman to be brown. Dark men wear best, and fair women,—and make the prettiest couple too. We did *hear*, ma'am, that Sir Walter was very much taken at Tuxwell with Lady Sophy Farleigh; now *her* complexion—”

“My brother admire Lady Sophia Farleigh!” interrupted Constance, with a smile. “Believe me, you are quite mistaken.”

“Oh! as to that, a young gentleman’s family is not always the first to be informed of his likings and dislikings; and I can assure you, Miss Norman, that the old housekeeper at the Castle had a letter from her niece, which is young lady’s maid at Tuxwell, to say that there was bets laid in the steward’s room of a match betwixt the young people before the end of the London season.”

“Walter is not gone to town for the season; he will be at home next week,” said Constance. And the moment the Redelys had taken leave, she flew to her own room to search for Sophy Farleigh’s neglected letter, and ascertain whether it betrayed any expectations confirmatory of Mrs. Redely’s intelligence.

But though it was clear that, at the time of writing, no understanding subsisted between the parties, Miss Norman fancied she could discover indications of interest on the part of Lady Sophia, such as, with her brother in town and probably a constant visitor at Lord Farleigh's, might ripen into a nearer regard. Sir Walter, like most young men of his age, was an indifferent correspondent. It was not from his own pen they were likely to have an exact account of his movements; and his sister accordingly set about making herself seriously uneasy lest the inventions of the servants' hall should be verified. As a girl, she had been girlishly fond of the lively, chatty Farleighs; as a young woman, she was conscious of their heartlessness and artificiality; but as a sister-in-law, she disliked all thoughts of either. Walter, her darling, warmhearted Walter, deserved something better than to become a secondary object to such a wife as was to be expected from a spoiled, selfish girl of fashion.

Full of this "darling and warm-hearted Walter," she now directed her steps towards his room, which was at the extremity of the gal-

lery in which her own and her mother's were situated. It had been his from the period of Mr. Manningham's instalment at Selwood; and during his absence, Constance occasionally visited it, rather to see that her brother's belongings were kept in order than as a matter of sentiment. It was, in fact, a complete young man's room, selected because overlooking a stable yard and disfigured by all sorts of unsightly treasures;—a gun-rack,—a bearskin by way of hearthrug, and a hammock by way of bed;—upon the chimney-piece, the jowl of an immense pike (landed by Walter at twelve years old), curiously preserved in a glass-case, with a pied pheasant (shot by him two years later), as its companion. In an old-fashioned bookcase were divers works upon farriery and angling, with his whole collection of Stonyhurst classics; among whose torn and shabby calfskin suits, were to be distinguished a few spruce prize-books in gilt morocco, “the gift of his attached friend, Rochus Manningham,” such as “Locke's Human Understanding,” “De Lolme's British Constitution,” and a superb edition (a farewell

gift to his departing pupil) of “Eustace’s Italy.” On a stand near the bookcase, were a pair of old-fashioned globes, on which strange defeatures were written by school-room abuse;—a tiger hunt having been sketched with a crowquill by young Norman on the area left mysteriously blank by geographers in the infancy of African discovery, and groups of leviathans and walruses in the then chartless polar seas;—while the celestial globe displayed, crowning the fat and starless sides of Cetus the whale, a striking likeness of Lady Norman’s globose old housekeeper!—

Over the fireplace, framed in black, and glazed in glass of village green, hung the portrait of a favourite grey poodle, named Titus, the first attempt of Constance in water-colours, the head of which not a little resembled the learned noddle of a barrister in his forensic wig. The tables and chairs, though originally of rich materials, bore evidence of having been occasionally used as a carpenter’s bench, bookbinder’s shelf, or lithographic press; the young Baronet, to whose eye that workshop of many trades

abounded in pleasant reminiscences of boyhood, having not only entreated that they might never be replaced, but that even the charred circle, traced by a red-hot glue-pot on the oaken floor, might be suffered to remain uneffaced.

To this pantehnicon of manly arts and sciences, did the gentle Constance now most inopportunately repair. In her brother's absence, that room appeared his especial home. Its very atmosphere was scented with the Russia-leather travelling trunks of Sir Walter, which communicated to his clothes their peculiar aroma; and from the double barrels of Nock, down to the ivory dog-whistle, not an object around her but was more particularly the property of her brother.

The motive of Miss Norman's visit was not merely a desire to look upon these familiar things, or indulge in thick-coming fancies touching their owner. She had completed, at Fern Hill, some water-colour drawings from sketches of Moræan scenery contained in her brother's sketch-book; and wished to surprise him with the gift of his own productions transferred as it

were from prose to poetry. Simple frames had been procured at Liverpool for these drawings; and though it was by no means her intention to keep so trifling a circumstance a secret from her mother, the state of Lady Norman's feelings and the affliction of the family would have rendered any immediate allusion trifling and unfeeling.

She was now about to hang up these pictures previous to Walter's return. She wished him to find them there on entering the room. She wished him to see how much he had been thought of during his absence; and after deliberate examination of lights and shades, fixed upon two panels opposite his bed as most advantageous to her performances. It was only to remove from the hooks already fixed there, two prints of Warwick Castle chiefly remarkable for their bold defiance of perspective; and Santa Maura and the Lencadian promontory were displayed in their stead, arrayed in those vague and ærial tints, with which Coply Fielding or Cattermole delight to envelop the mysteries of nature in the mysteries of art.

Having fixed them to her liking, Constance

sat down beside the hammock in one of the most notched and discoloured of Sir Walter's favourite chairs, to contemplate her handiwork;—unconsciously leaning her cheek upon her hand, while demurring whether her Ægean sea might not be a thought too blue, or her Ionian sunset a shade too purple;—when, lo! the door burst open, and her mother, pale and indignant, stood before her!—

“What are you doing here, Constance?” cried Lady Norman, whose countenance derived an almost cadaverous hue from contrast with the deep mourning in which she was attired.

“I often come here, mamma,” replied Miss Norman, startled into a blush,—“often when my brother is at Selwood,—and often when he is away.”

“I desire then, that whether he is absent or present, you will never enter the room again,” replied the agitated Lady Norman.

“Certainly not, if such are your commands. But will not Walter think it very odd,—very unkind,—if, instead of visiting him as usual,

when he has his drawing or bookbinding about, I am obliged to say that you have ordered me to refuse?—”

“Is it absolutely necessary you should tell him so?”—demanded Lady Norman. “Can you not leave it to his delicacy to suggest that there are eight rooms open below in which at all hours of the day you can meet unmolested, without selecting his own for your mysterious communications?—”

“My dear mother, if you object, I will never again cross the threshold,” cried Constance, with growing earnestness.—“I came hither only to hang up yonder two drawings, which I intend as a present to my brother.”

Lady Norman cast her eyes in the direction pointed out. The paintings seemed to her disordered mind to have been finished and the frames procured, in deliberate secrecy.

“You perhaps remember the two subjects in Walter’s album?”—pursued Constance in an extenuating tone. “I have only filled out and amplified his outline.”

“Have the goodness to take them down again,” said Lady Norman, harshly. “I do not choose that he should find them hanging there.”

Miss Norman hesitated.—“I finished them expressly for my brother!”—pleaded she, in a tone tremulous from disappointment. “Ever since his return to England, Walter has been asking me to undertake a drawing for him. The picture in oils of his own painting which he sent to London to be framed, was intended for my dressing-room; and I shall be deeply mortified if you forbid me to give him these drawings in return.”

Lady Norman made no reply. She began silently to remove the pictures from the wall; on which, the tears of Constance burst forth.

“Indeed, mother, you are wrong,” said she, moved beyond her filial patience,—“to take so much pains to lessen the affection between Walter and myself. God knows my love for him does not diminish a grain of my respect and attachment towards my mother!—But I should deceive you, mamma, if I did not candidly declare that nothing you can say or do will pre-

vent my cherishing for him a love as firm as it is tender. You are unjust towards us both, in wishing that it should be otherwise.”

“ Unhappy girl !” cried Lady Norman, letting fall the pictures she held in her hand —“ are you thus madly bent on goading me on to declarations which may prove the ruin of the family ?—Know that this man whom you caress as a brother, whom you love with such dangerous, such mistaken affection——”

“ Mother !”—faltered Constance, grasping Lady Norman’s arm, and gasping for breath——

“ Is no more to you than a stranger !—Constance ! Walter Norman is *not* my son,—Walter Norman is *not* your brother !—”

There was no room for further explanations. The agonized girl had fallen into a state of insensibility at the feet of her mother !—

CHAPTER IV.

I had a thing to say—but let it go!
The sun is in the heavens, and the proud day,
Attended with the pleasures of the world,
Is all too wanton and too full of gauds
To give me audience!

SHAKSPEARE.

THE following day, at noon, Lady Norman was still watching the heavy slumbers produced by the opiates it had been found necessary to administer to her daughter, in the intervals of the nervous tremours into which Constance had fallen on recovering from her swoon. A hope had presented itself to the mother's mind, that, on waking, the sufferer might fancy all that had transpired, the frightful delusion of a dream.

The repentant woman could not forgive herself for having allowed her excited soul to be surprised out of a secret so long and painfully preserved inviolate. She was prepared to treat the whole as a chimera of her daughter's brain, and to keep for the future a more prudent guard over her lips.

But all these hopes evaporated when consciousness became gradually restored to the affectionate girl, whose strength had failed under that sudden sentence of bereavement!—To learn that he whom she had so long loved as a brother was altogether lost to her, had frozen the warm current of her blood; and she awoke from her lethargy like a person stunned and bruised by some terrible blow.

“Is this your hand, mother?”—she faltered, seizing that of Lady Norman, which was lying on her pillow. “Have you been with me all this time?—I fancied I had left you.—I fancied that I had received some cruel injury, and quitted Selwood for ever!—Have I been ill, mother? My arm is bound up—my head is stiff,—have I been bled?—what has been the matter?—”

“ A dizziness,—a sudden faintness,” faltered Lady Norman.

“ True, I remember now;—I was brought hither out of Walter’s room.—What can have made me ill?—Was there not something—some disappointment about my brother?—Is Walter come home?—”

“ Sir Walter is not here,” replied Lady Norman; and the dryness of her tone brought back the fatal truth to the recollection of the unhappy girl.

“ Oh, mother!—I remember all now!”—cried she, letting fall her head on her pillow. “ I remember the dreadful sentence which deprived me of my senses. Were you sporting with me? were you trying my courage?—Say *yes*!—Tell me that you wanted only to ascertain the extent of my affection for him!—”

But Lady Norman could not make the desired declaration. She could only say—
“ Compose yourself, my dearest child!—unless you wish to procure the ruin of Walter Norman, be calm, be cautious!—”

“ It is *true*, then ?” said Constance, faintly, raising her eyes towards Lady Norman—“ It is *true* that I have lost my brother—my friend—my companion.—Oh, mother ! why have you deprived me of the playmate of my childhood !” And greatly to her relief, tears now flowed from the burning eyes of the invalid.

Lady Norman felt that it was not the moment to enter upon her own vindication. “ You are not yet able to listen to the details of this unhappy story,” said she. “ When I find you restored to self-control, you shall know all. It has required much, Constance, to bring from the lips of your mother an avowal which must lower her for ever in your estimation, as the abettor of an unpardonable fraud. But for years, my child, has the hand of Heaven been heavy on me !—For years have I been assured that chastisement was awaiting me where it would be sorest to bear. It was in *you*, Constance, the child of my pride and my affection, that my guilt was to be punished. It was *you* who were to suffer,—*you* who were to be made a sacrifice !

I saw you becoming the slave of an unlawful affection, and rushed in to save you from destruction !”

“ You are in error,” replied Constance, with mournful composure. “ So long as I believed Walter to be my brother, where was the danger for me?—It is only *now* that my trials are beginning.”

“ They must arise, then, from your own rashness,” cried Lady Norman, with a look of consternation. “ Walter has no more idea of the truth, than *you* had yesterday. He must never know it,—never suspect it !—*He*, at least, is guiltless of all reproach.—It is your father and mother, Constance, who are to blame.—Reflect that the slightest indiscretion on your part would betray your parents to infamy ; and him, whom you have loved as a brother, to a life of *poverty* and shame.”

“ I will be careful,” murmured Miss Norman, with a wistful look of self-compassion.

“ Walter is a foundling,—an obscure foundling,—sprung from the lowest grade of the French people, and wantonly adopted as Heir

of Selwood to gratify the family pride of your childless father!—But he has been trained in honourable sentiments, and principles of uprightness and integrity; and I am convinced that were the slightest suspicion of the truth to reach his mind, he would instantly reveal all, and renounce the honours unworthily forced on his adoption.”

“He would do well,” murmured Constance, in the same tone of unnatural composure.

“*He* would do well to obey the dictates of his conscience. But what right have *I*, pledged by a solemn oath to my husband to uphold this imposition, to sanction his being reared in luxury and honour, in the bosom of an affectionate family, in the respect of a multitude of dependants,—to cause him, on his arriving at man’s estate, to be cast out to ruin and disgrace?—I love Walter,—I appreciate his excellence, his nobleness;—it was only while apprehending danger from *your* infatuation, Constance, that my heart was irritated against one who has grown up with me to maturity in the love and duty of a son.—I feel that I could not sup-

port the spectacle of his degradation ! I promised the dying Sir Richard Norman to be a mother to the boy. It is not from *my* quiver that the arrow must be launched against his peace.”

“ *He*, at least, has done no wrong,” faltered Constance.

“ Nor must he suffer wrong. It is enough that I have violated my solemn engagement for the preservation of my child. She must not render me the origin of a deeper sin, by allowing the smallest hint, the slightest suggestion, of this fatal secret to escape her lips.”

“ I promise, mother,” replied Miss Norman.

“ Whatever may betide,—nothing,—no earthly consideration,—no prayer,—no entreaty,—must wring the confession from your lips ?—”

“ So far I solemnly engage myself,” replied, Miss Norman. “ But from the alteration of my manner, Walter will suspect that something is amiss. Exercise what care I may, I shall betray myself !—I cannot be with him as I have been !—My grief—my consciousness—will suggest inevitable changes. Every action of mine

will be an avowal. Oh, mother ! if you do not wish Walter to suspect the truth, take me hence, —part us,—or the first half hour we pass together will shew him that a fatal secret is weighing on my mind !—”

Lady Norman gazed with tender pity upon the agitated girl. “ It is not to *me*, whose life has been embittered by duplicity, that you need enlarge upon the difficulties of your task,” she replied. “ I know all you will have to suffer,—all the efforts you will be required to make. But, setting your mother’s welfare out of your view, I solemnly entrust to your keeping the memory of your father, and the peace and prosperity of Walter.”

And hastening from the room, she left her victim to ponder upon these things. She felt that it would require time and reflection to subdue the agitated soul of her daughter to calmness. At present, Constance was to see no one. Solitude and silence must prepare her for her first interview with Sir Walter.

Already, Matilda was beginning to tax herself with the perpetration of a new fault. She

felt that wrong as had been her silence, more culpable still was the confession which terror and excitement had at length extorted from her lips. She had lost the respect of her child,—she had embittered the innocent life of Constance,—and only to plunge her into new dangers !

“ A fatality is upon me ! ”—cried she, in her hour of solitary self-reproach. “ From the first moment to the last, every step I have taken in this iniquitous business has plunged me into deeper misery !—Having once set foot in the crooked path, it became impossible for me to regain the ways of happiness and truth.”

Her compunction increased when, having exerted herself to rise, Constance joined her in the drawing-room, and attempted to resume her daily occupations. Miss Norman’s cheek was ghastly, and her manner so bewildered, that her mother was confirmed in her belief that, in half an hour, Sir Walter would discover some fatal mystery to be oppressing the mind of his sister. Hoping that change of scene might be beneficial, Lady Norman

proposed a drive, and laboured in the course of their airing to promote desultory conversation.—But it would not do ! — Constance cast a half-reproachful, half-stupified look towards her ; as if reproving her that at such a moment, she could revert to things indifferent. Despair was upon the young girl's mind, as if the remains of one tenderly beloved were constantly extended before her eyes !—

All holy trusts, all earthly affections, seemed crumbling from her grasp. All that her life had been past in loving and respecting was no longer to be respected,—no longer to be loved. Her mother,—her adored mother,—had for years been occupied in deceiving the world and *her* ;—her brother,—her Walter.—But from that point she recalled her thoughts with a cold and sickening shudder !—Little as she knew of the world, Constance felt that the false position in which she stood, was one unprecedented ;—at variance with the spirit of the times and the march of human events. She had been singled out for sorrow,—been singled out for probation ;—perhaps for atonement. It was in

vain she tried to rally her spirits to reply to Lady Norman's commonplace observations upon the road and the weather.—“Do not talk to me, mother!” burst at length irrepressibly from her lips. “I cannot yet recover from this dreadful blow!—Leave me—leave me to myself!—”

Lady Norman discovered that her rash effort to retain the affections, and guard the welfare, of her child, was to be the source of deeper alienation between them!—She had rescued Constance from the familiarities of Sir Walter Norman;—she had consigned her to the clinging curse of gloomy *visions* *lights*!—

“To-morrow, perhaps, he may be here,” faltered Miss Norman, when she took leave at night of her mother. “God keep him away! Hourly as I used formerly to pray for his return, do I now pray for his absence.—I must have time to prepare myself for the meeting.—”

And “time,” Sir Walter seemed well inclined to accord!—The appointed week was prolonged to a fortnight; yet he neither came nor wrote.

Constance, who for the first ten days had congratulated herself on the postponement of the trying hour, grew anxious during the last four. If the prognostications of the Tuxwell servants should prove true!—If Walter should be attaching himself,—nay, engaging himself to Lady Sophia Farleigh!—If he should come home only to announce that he was about to bring into the midst of them a bride,—a wife,—a being to engross for the future his whole fondness and regard!—If as her brother he had done this, Constance would have been consoled by the reflection that nature's ties are never to be cast aside; that even a brother's father, a sister's claims remain valid. But this illusion was gone for ever!—It was not on such grounds she could now presume to appeal to his affections. Her rights were extinguished; her attachment was a mockery!—If Walter were to marry, her mother would doubtless remove from Selwood, and they must learn to visit that beloved home as strangers; and look upon that beloved being as the property of another.

At length, a letter arrived in his handwriting

bearing the London postmark. It was addressed to Constance, but Constance had not courage to open it ; and she wept in silence while her mother read aloud Sir Walter's easy, frank, affectionate account of his proceedings in town ; the attendance at Lincoln's Inn exacted of him by Avesford ; and the intimacy he was forming for his own pleasure with his relations the Morningsons.

“ Since meeting them at dinner at the Farleighs,” he wrote, “ nothing can exceed the attentions I have received from Lady Mornington. I do not cite our fine-lady cousin as the most faultless of human beings, my dear Constance ; but considered as a mere woman of the world, she is agreeable and well-bred, and has taken infinite pains to conduce to my amusement. At *her* suggestion, I have engaged a house for the season in Park Lane ; and leave it to your eloquence to prepare my mother for listening to my arguments in favour of your both sharing it with me after Easter, as soon as the ceremonies of attaining my majority have received honour due at

Selwood Manor. Avesford promises that in a few days he will relinquish all further claim on my time ; when I shall have the happiness of telling you, as I daily assure myself, how truly I am both yours and my mother's most attached and faithful

W. N."

" He may be here perhaps to-morrow !" — was Constance's only remark upon the letter.

" He has entangled himself in an intimacy with his greatest enemies !" — was Lady Norman's further-sighted rejoinder. But at that moment their attention was claimed by an invitation from the Redelys, who were in the habit of assembling the neighbourhood on occasion of a fair held from time immemorial upon Avonwell Green, enlivened by rustic sports and popular diversions. In a remote county, any pretext serves for bringing country neighbours together ; and the Normans, Farleighs, Skaremidges, and a few others, were annually to be found among the gay visitors of the Mid-lent fair.

" You will of course send an excuse ?"

said Miss Norman, who in her earlier days had been accustomed to look forward with glee to the humble fête.

“What pretext have we for an excuse?”—inquired her mother, justly considering that Constance would be less embarrassed by Sir Walter’s presence in a numerous company. “Walter may choose to attend a meeting to which so many boyish reminiscences are attached; and it will be thought strange if for the first time we absent ourselves.”

A note of acceptance was accordingly despatched; intimating that Sir Walter was not yet returned from town, but would probably be at Selwood in time to accompany Lady and Miss Norman to pass the day at the Forges. Constance made no further remonstrance. She cared little now whither she went, or by whom her cares were noted. Her attention was absorbed in watching for the unusual stir in the house that might at any moment announce the return of the absent master.

Yet, after all this caution, Sir Walter’s arrival was a surprise!—The mildness of the weather

had tempted Lady Norman and her daughter into the park, so far as a little glen dotted with thorns, among which were usually to be found the first violets blown at Selwood; — and every former spring, Constance, full of hope and happiness, had been on the spot sooner than the violets, listening to the linnets singing on the bare sprays of the old thorn-trees, as if *they* too were watching for the upspringing of the early flowers. But Constance took no further heed of the weather or the season. On this her first visit to the glen, she found it sheeted with white and purple violets, and fragrant with their pure and transient perfume.

On arriving at the spot, and noting the profusion of its tassels of pale primroses, with the green sheaths of the orchis starting up under the knotted, rugged, old thorns, Constance did not stoop as usual to present one of the first spring-flowers to her mother. She looked listlessly around, as if wondering why so much beauty should be lavished in vain, and was about to propose returning homewards, when a murmur

of voices was heard upon the air, and in a moment Sir Walter and a stranger were seen approaching them. Constance and her mother were fortunately still standing in the hollow of the glen ; for the former was incapable of stirring to meet the new-comers. Sir Walter, however, hurried down towards them in advance of his companion.

“ Mother, I have brought my cousin Captain Norman to pay you a visit,” cried he, seizing the extended hand of Lady Norman. “ How have you been ?—I am afraid you have thought me dilatory ; but I assure you it was impossible to come before.—Captain Norman ! my mother and sister.”

And while Lord Mornington’s son-and-heir was performing his ceremonious salutations and lisping his far-fetched civilities, Sir Walter threw his arms around the waist of Constance, and, pressing her to his bosom, imprinted an affectionate kiss upon her lips.

“ Don’t scold me for having delayed so long in town !”—cried he, attributing her recoil to displeasure. “ I assure you, my dearest girl, I would

gladly have come last week, could Avesford have released me. But my darling Constance—how pale you are looking!—Are you ill?—What has been the matter?—”

“I am not very well,” faltered Miss Norman, her eyes dim with tears and scarcely able to sustain herself. “This is the first time I have been out for many days, and we were on the point of returning to the house.”

Without another word of inquiry, Sir Walter drew her arm within his own; and supporting her whole weight upon it, assisted her up the steep ascent. He did not so much as look round to ascertain how Lady Norman was getting on with her unexpected guest; or whether her inquiries after Lord and Lady Mornington had brought them into a train of conversation.

“My dear sister,—how weak you are—how nervous!”—said he, in cordial tones of affection at once welcome and painful to the ear of his companion. “Have you had any advice, Constance?—Were you ever before subject to these attacks?—Why did not my mother write to me?—Had I known that you were indis-

posed, not all the guardians in the world, nor all the lawyers in Westminster Hall, should have detained me in London!—Lean on me, Constance. You breathe so short, dearest, that I almost fear you have ventured too far from home.—Have you been suffering from cold?—Is your chest delicate?—Let me pin your shawl closer over your chest.”

Nearly as incoherent as were Walter’s interrogations, were the replies of poor Constance. She said that she was recovering from a feverish attack,—that she was better now,—that she should soon be quite well,—quite herself again! —But as she uttered this promise, tears dropped from her eyes. She could scarcely support the excess of kindness with which the unfortunate Walter was greeting his alienated sister.

“Had I dreamed of your indisposition, I would not of course have brought down Norman with me,” said he, as they proceeded together slowly towards the house. “But the Morningtons have been so civil to me in town, and are so anxious to be on the best terms with us and to offer you every protection on your introduction

into society, that when Captain Norman mentioned one day at dinner his desire to see Selwood Manor, I could not refuse myself the pleasure of introducing him to his venerable ancestors and living relations. *Entre nous*," continued Sir Walter, lowering his voice,—
"Norman is a desperate fine gentleman, and disagreeable enough to those who do not take him in the right way. But he is by no means such an ass or such a coxcomb as he pretends to be."

"You do not give a very favourable picture of him," said Constance, trying to rally her spirits.

"I mean to secure myself against two evils, my dear, by letting you into the secret. I don't want you to fall in love with him,—and I don't want you to fall out with him."

"I promise you to do neither," replied Constance, gradually cheered by the sound of Sir Walter's gladsome voice. "But what are we to do with your fine gentleman?—To-morrow, mamma has promised to spend the day and dine at the Forges?"

"And why not?"—cried young Norman.

“What a refreshing novelty for a man who has lived enshrined, like a pagod, in the inner sanctuary of the temple of exclusivism!—Norman has never heard people talk above their breath, unless his Colonel giving the word of command; nor seen young ladies move a muscle of their sweet countenances, except an occasional glance of horror at some tiger presented to them as a partner. Old Redely, with his slaps on the back, and an appetite that could ‘drink up eisel, eat a crocodile,’ will appear to *him* a monster worth visiting the Prairies to behold; while as to your pretty, prattling Amy, with what her mamma characteristically calls ‘her cherry-clack always a-going,’ he will conclude her to be wound up every morning for exhibition, like Bautte’s enamel conjurers and tumblers.”

“You will venture then to include your friend in the party?” demanded Miss Norman.

“Certainly. But call him not *friend*, Hal, an’ thou lovest me!—*Friend* is a name I reserve for my most familiar of familiars. It is not every cousin one wishes to call a friend. You and I, dearest, are friends as completely as

though we were not brother and sister. But had Amy Redely been my *twin-born*, I could never have made a friend of *her* !—”

Involuntarily Constance replied by a grateful pressure of the arm on which she was leaning. But the movement was one of forgetfulness, or rather of reminiscence. Next moment, the impulse was repented and atoned by a crimson blush;—and precisely when this accusing testimony was mantling on her cheek, did Lady Norman and their visitor come up with them, as they entered together the swing-gate of the lawn.

By some strange association, there occurred at that moment to Matilda's mind the singular scene which,—returning from that very walk eighteen years before, previous to the birth of Constance,—had occurred between herself, Sir Richard Norman, and Ghita, the Italian nurse of the supposititious heir of Selwood !—

CHAPTER V.

Du clinquant,—des grâces,—une nuance d'esprit sur un grand fond d'arrogance ;—telle est l'essence du fat de nos jours.

TABLEAU DE PARIS,

“ THAT worthy with the peaked beard, who stands opposite watching you from his frame, as if expecting you to ask him to take wine with him, has the honour, Norman, to be your ancestor and namesake,”—said Sir Walter to Captain Norman,—at the close of a sociable family-dinner in the Selwood eating-room, the key-stones of whose venerable oaken ceiling were carved with the family crest, and the massive old plate of whose sideboard was profusely wrought with the same device. “ Allow me to present to you Sir

Giles Norman, Knight, master of the revels to Harry the Eighth ; whose effigy yonder, according to the shewing of half a dozen county histories, is an original by Holbein,—according to my poor judgment, a miserable copy.”

“ I am no judge of pictures,” replied the gentle Captain, whose alias of the ‘ Spring-chicken ’ was current throughout the three regiments of guards. “ At the Grove, which is a mere citizen’s box, we have only a few hunting sketches, and Gilray’s caricatures. But were I to possess a gallery, I should prefer having it filled with copies. One *has* some chance of keeping copies in the family ; whereas the chances are ten to one in favour of Raphaels or Claudes finding their way to Phillips’ or Christies’ in the course of half a dozen generations. Now-a-days, people are wise enough to look upon their pictures and timber, like their exchequer bills, as a tangible investment.”

The tone and phraseology of Captain Norman were so new to Constance and her mother, that though he paused for a reply, neither of them ventured on a remark.

“And yet,” said Sir Walter, “one cannot help admiring the almost Roman feeling which inspires so many of the half-ruined Italian nobles, to preserve the treasures of art in their mildewed marble palaces, while they subsist in frugal self-denial upon lentil porridge, and muddy wine.”

“There is nothing *I* can help more easily!”—lisped the Captain, sipping his claret. “*I* plead guilty to a total want of sympathy in heroical madness, magnanimity, Roman feeling, or whatever you and the tragedy-makers are pleased to call it. These high-minded high mightinesses would lead a happier life by selling the chef-d’œuvres they cannot afford to keep, to the nobles of our *nation boutiquière*, who *can*; and thus be enabled to find themselves in food and fuel. In my opinion, personal comfort is a pleasanter companion for one’s threescore years and ten, than a whole cohort of aguish fine sentiments.”

“*Your* edition of Benthamism, then, advocates the greatest happiness of the greatest number of years, eh?” said Walter, amused by his cousin’s affectation. “But I am really shocked to

find you so degenerate a Norman!—My conscience will compel me to marry and cut off the entail, to prevent your sending the famous Selwood Titian to the auction mart the first time the four aces are against you.”

At this menace, the Captain smiled what was, in fact, his customary, fastidious, smile; which Lady Norman interpreted into a peculiar and most significant sneer.

“The family tree, you know, has only two acorns left upon it,” continued the unreserved Walter. “Constance, of course, counting for nothing as an unprofitable branch.”

“You forget, my dear Sir, my Trieste uncle’s semi-Italian brood; to say nothing of my Yankee uncle’s seven goodly sons, who are selling nails and treacle in sundry stores on the banks of the Mississippi,” replied the Spring-chicken, languidly. “Were you to vanish from the face of the earth, there is every prospect of legitimate heirs to Selwood for centuries to come!—”

And the Captain again smiled what appeared to Lady Norman a malignant sneer.

“Of the Trieste Normans, we know nothing,” resumed the Spring-chicken, after a pause. “My mother is the last woman in the world to keep up family connections. Familyism is at best a *parvenu* virtue. It may be a proof of tact in *new* people to look after the rooting and shooting of their offsets, to establish a name; but a mighty inconvenient thing for people of a certain standing. In ancient houses, as in old trees, the branches are apt to decay at the extremities. It is only among very great people one ever hears such a word as poor relations.”

“You have not that excuse for disowning your Italian and American cousins,” said Walter, almost provoked by his coxcombry;—“for I understand they are immensely wealthy.”

“Are they?—I never asked.—I know nothing at all about them,” replied the Spring-chicken. “I consider it a serious misfortune to belong to what is called a good family, with a genealogy extant; or like the balance sheet of a haberdasher’s stock-book, peerage, a baronetage, or gentryage, to record the amount of one’s kindred,

and entitle uncles and aunts, whose existence one might otherwise ignore, to inflict their impertinent advice. It is owing to the family pride of an idiotic old Lady Audley, whom, but for one of these family catalogues, my father would forget was his sister, that I was not made partner in an ale-brewery, instead of an ensign in the guards. The lucky dog who took my place, is realizing ten thousand a-year and keeps hunters at Melton ; while I have ten thousand pence and a pony !—Had I been a Smith, Brown, Green, White, or Thompson, instead of a Norman of Selwood, I had by this time been a rogue in grain, and a happy man !—Who knows !—Perhaps I might have risen to be an Alderman !—”

Unable to distinguish between the jest and earnest of her superfine cousin, Constance represented to her mother, on repairing to the drawing-room, the danger of hazarding his company at the Forges the following day.

“ I have already sent off a messenger with a request for permission,” replied Lady Norman, not sorry to find her daughter’s attention en-

grossed by the absurdities of her cousin. “And you are mistaken in supposing that the Redelys will take offence at his impertinence. Amy and her mother will delight to make the acquaintance of one who will appear to *them* the type of London fashion.”

“But why not send an excuse for the whole party?”—inquired Sir Walter, on the arrival of an answer from the Forges written with blue ink on embossed paper, and sealed with pea-green wax. “Constance is scarcely strong enough for the exertion,—are you darling?—Constance would be much better at home!”

“It will be impossible *now* to excuse ourselves,” said Lady Norman, coldly. “The Redelys are friendly neighbourly people, who would take our absence to heart.”

“My sister, at least, need not be fagged to death to please them,” cried Sir Walter. “*You*, my dear mother, and Norman, might drive over together; and *I* will join you at dinner, if Constance should not like to be left here quite alone.”

“Indeed I am well enough to accompany

mamma," faltered Miss Norman, with glowing cheeks, aware how little this arrangement would please her mother. "I promise myself much pleasure in doing the honours of Avonwell fair to Captain Norman."

This remark, addressed in deprecation to her mother by the trembling girl, was received with a gratified bow by the guardsman ; who, unused to bestow much attention on girls, had hitherto scarcely deigned a glance at his country cousin. He now looked gratefully towards her, and admitted that she was as pretty as discriminating. Her compliment lent him eyes to discover the dazzling fairness of her complexion, and the Madonna-like expression of her countenance. "With a little fashioning," mused the Spring-chicken, "the poor girl might pass muster in London. That head and those curls would produce a sensation in a ground-tier opera box."

And faithless to his London principles, he forthwith took a chair beside her, to determine whether the accomplishments of her mind corresponded with the beauties of her person.

"May I ask whether you give the preference

this year to ‘ Flowers of Loveliness,’ or ‘ Gems of Beauty ?’”—said he, in his most mincing tone ; “ or whether you remain constant to the poor dear ‘ Keepsake ?’ ”

Miss Norman admitted, with unblushing face, that she had seen neither of them. “ My aunt Avesford once sent me one of the Annuals,” said she ; “ but nothing pleases me which is so unreal. Such books remind me of the enchanter’s rope of sand.”

“ Thank Heaven she has no taste for literature !”—was the guardsman’s inward remark. “ I would as soon make love to the black gentleman, as to a blue lady ; and in these scribbling times, one is never safe. My mother’s maid brought out a fashionable novel last year, under the title of ‘ A Dowager Duchess’ ! May I inquire, Miss Norman, how you like the new blonde ?” he continued, resuming his catechism. “ Do you prefer *blonde argentée*, or the massive *dentelle d’argent* ?”

“ I never heard of either,” replied Constance, unabashed.

“ Thank Heaven she is not an *élégante* !”

again mused the captain. "Half the men of my acquaintance are ruined by milliners' bills! Will you allow me to ask which you consider the most humorous," he resumed, aloud;—"Dantan's *Statuettes*, or H. B.'s Sketches?"

"You will think me very ignorant, I fear, when I own that I have not seen them," answered Miss Norman, with a smile.

"You *fear*!—How I reverence such ignorance!"—cried her cousin, with real or pretended rapture. "In these times, young ladies are so wonderfully knowing, so apt to break into bon-mots and *calembourgs* before they break through their leading-strings, that it is luxurious to meet with anything really unsophisticated. I am grateful for my happy fortune in making your acquaintance previous to your first season. By July next, my dear Miss Norman, you will probably possess a whole wilderness of annuals,—have learned the price of blonde,—and placed Dantan's D'Orsay on your chimney piece!—"

"Not if all this acquirement of knowledge is dependent upon her quitting Selwood," said

Lady Norman, coming to the assistance of Constance, whom she saw puzzled by the strangeness of her cousin.

“ I thought I understood from Lady Mornington that you had engaged Lady Margaret’s house in Park Lane?” said Captain Norman, turning towards Sir Walter.

“ For six months ; and I trust we shall all be settled there by the middle of May,” he replied, looking up from a letter he was reading.

“ Not *all* ; you must really excuse *me*, Walter,” said Lady Norman. “ I am not desirous that Constance should make her appearance in the London world.”

“ And in what other world, my dear Madam, is there any possibility of moving ?”—interposed Captain Norman, as if really asking for information sake. “ WHERE do you intend Miss Norman to live ?—with *whom* ?—for *what* ?—”

“ With her family ; and I trust to ensure happiness to herself and *them*,” replied Lady Norman, in a more subdued voice.

“ But my dear mother, I engaged this

house solely with a view to your pleasure and my sister's advantage!" argued Walter, vexed at so strange a resolution on the part of Lady Norman.

"It is not yet three months since I heard you declare your intention of remaining at Selwood till the grouse-season," replied Lady Norman, coolly.

"But I had not then learned from Lady Mornington, Lady Farleigh, and others of our friends, the necessity for my sister being presented, in order to appear in the world with the distinction becoming her position in life," said Walter, stoutly. "Nothing but my views for Constance would have determined me to pass a season in London previous to taking my seat in Parliament."

"I thank you for your care of her welfare," replied Lady Norman, almost ungraciously, "I hope I am not likely to neglect it; but I have no intention of taking her to town."

Nettled by the positive tone assumed by her ladyship, yet unwilling to startle their guest by

a family dispute (the first he had ever been disposed to attempt with his mother), Sir Walter deferred to a more convenient season the arguments he intended to offer in favour of his plans. While Lady Norman resolved to disappoint a project which would throw her daughter hourly into the company of Sir Walter in all the propinquity of a London house, Sir Walter was determined that either Constance and his mother should accompany him to town, or that he would remain with them at Selwood.

Next day, he attempted to visit Constance in her dressing-room, before breakfast, to exact a promise of co-operation in his attempts. But the door was closed against him ; and the maid answered his knock with information that Miss Norman would meet him presently in the breakfast-room. It was impossible to obtain a moment of private interview ; and immediately after breakfast they set out for the Forges.

“ Take your leave of trees and vegetation, Captain Norman,” said Constance,—as the barouche

wound along a lane, the sloping banks of which were clothed with plantations, in which the varied hues, caused by the budding of the underwood, —the red dogwood rods and green shoots of the larch trees,—supplied the brightness of summer foliage. “ This shelving lane, with its wild hyacinths and lilies of the valley, is the last pleasant spot between Selwood and Avonwell. A step beyond it, and you will discover the influence of the Forges.—See! The road is already mended with scoriæ. Half a mile further, and the evil spell has done its worst.”

And, according to her indications, the stranger perceived the trees gradually diminish into bushes, and the dwarfed bushes finally disappear. Then followed a host of sickly pastures, disfigured by an atmosphere of that disagreeable, calcined nature, emanating in a less degree from every brick-field; and next (the Forges being that day at rest in honour of the fair, and the sky consequently pure from its usual clouds of smoke and vapour,) they descried, on the top of a naked hill, the soil of which looked as if

extracted from the crater of Vesuvius, the huge, square, family mansion of Mr. Redely, of dingy red picked out with white; covered with tall, slender, irregular chimneys, like an asparagus bed running to seed. Around it neither tree nor shrub was visible. Had a swarm of locusts passed over the land, it could not have been more completely denuded. Some attempt had been made to coax a few laurels into growth, in the fine grey dust and ashes surrounding the paved court. But the laurels knew better. The domain of the Fire King might be a cool and humid retreat, compared with the scorched wilderness called Avonwell House by the Redelys, and the Forges by every one else in the county.

“What an Avernus!”—cried the Captain, as, winding round the knoll on which the house was perched, they overlooked on the declivity below the range of furnaces usually glowing with flame, but now exhibiting only their blackened sides and iron chimneys. “Were I master of Selwood, I would not allow such a defeature to

exist within five miles of me.—I *would* buy the fellow out !—”

“ I fear he is quite as well able to dispose of *me* ;—and as I happen to have two uncles who consider this spot the only interesting feature in the neighbourhood,” observed Sir Walter, “(one of them being proprietor of a manufactory twice as unsightly as this,) the objection would come with an ill grace.”

“ But the factory to which you allude,” said the Spring-chicken, “ is probably situated at Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, or some other city of abominations.—There are and ought to be condemned spots set apart for these disgraces ! People have no right to go about defiling the face of respectable counties and ruining the exquisite scenery of Derbyshire or Worcestershire, by furnaces and engine-chimneys.”

“ When first I came to Selwood, instead of the Forges at Avonwell, there was only a trace that something of the kind had formerly existed,” observed Lady Norman. “ It was a great source of regret to us when, on our return from

the continent, we found a favourite spot thus miserably disfigured."

"That must be one and twenty years ago," said Captain Norman, after a moment's reflection. "How long did you remain abroad after the birth of Sir Walter?—"

"About two years," replied Lady Norman, her cheeks flushing crimson at the inquiry.

"Miss Norman, then, was born in England?" he persisted.

"Yes,—in England."

"At Selwood Manor?—"

"Since you are curious on the subject," said Lady Norman, hastily, not knowing whether to resent his pertinacity, or turn it into a jest,—“Lady Mornington is best able to satisfy you. She was in London at the time, and visited Constance while lying in her cradle.”

"But she did not visit Sir Walter while lying in *his*!"—said Captain Norman,—turning sharply round with a look in which Lady Norman's conscience read a thousand accusations, and which caused the blood to recede from the face of Miss Norman.

“That was very uncivil of her,—a great disrespect to the Heir of Selwood!”—cried Sir Walter, laughing, and wholly free from the embarrassment evinced by his mother and sister. “For if I remember, Lord and Lady Mornington informed me that they were in Paris the whole time of my poor father’s sojourn there.”

“Not the *whole* time,” observed Captain Norman.—“You will find that they quitted France before the heir of Selwood made his appearance.”

The expression, though by no means unusual, seemed to convey a particular meaning to the ear of Lady Norman.

“Ay, ay!—I remember!—I was born during the Hundred Days, when English, Russ, and Pruss, were trembling under the twinkling of poor Nap’s expiring star!—I fancy my father and mother were the only persons who stayed to face the enemy.”

“Not quite!”—replied Norman, gravely. “There were still a few fellow-countrymen on the spot, to watch over so momentous

an event as the arrival of the heir of the Normans !”

Fortunately for Lady Norman, the carriage having at that moment reached the tumult of the fair, with its tin trumpets, wooden rattles, drums, fifes, men, women, and children, — the four spirited horses could with difficulty be held in by the coachman ; and the grimy population of the manufacturing district not recognising the carriage, immediately raised a cry of “ shame,” and put themselves in posture of defence.

“ Make your fellow push on through the midst of them !” — said Captain Norman with a languid glance over the heads of a mob which, even in the only holiday of their year, retained their claim to the title of the great unwashed. — “ Bid him whip his horses over a few of them to teach them better manners !”

Happily for the tender bones of the Spring-chicken, his counsels were unheard by the dingy tribe agitating themselves round the carriage.

“ Go gently, Thomas !” — was Sir Walter’s

counterorder to the coachman. "At the top of the green we will get out; then take the carriage round the back way to Mr. Redely's, without returning hither. Had I known the road was likely to be so crowded, my good friends, we would not have attempted to make our way."

A loud huzza hailed the delivery of this conciliatory address; extorted by the pale face and agitated demeanour of Constance, which Sir Walter attributed to the threatening aspect of the mob.

"Long life to Sir Walter Norman, and the old house of Selwood!" cried a few of the foremost malcontents, who had been examining the armorial bearings on the traces they were preparing to cut. And while the people shouted, and the horses gave renewed signs of disapprobation, Captain Norman secretly commented upon the sneaking spirit of Sir Walter, who had neglected so glorious an opportunity of trampling down half a dozen filthy mechanics presuming to dispute his title to the crown of the

causeway. It was not a pupil of Lady Mornington's school who was likely to have patience with such pitiful subservience,—such cringing to the sovereignty of the people.—

“How pale and nervous you both look!”—cried Mrs. Redely, as she welcomed Constance and her mother to the gay marquee appropriated to her party in the meadow devoted, by the permission of her husband, to the sports of the day. “I suppose you've been frightened with those spirity horses?—Will you take anything?—A glass of sherry, or old Tudy Madiera?—Do!—Well, if you wont, the foot-races had better begin. The people have put them off half an hour for us. The Skaremidges came early; and so did the Smiths and Greens.—But where's Amy?—Amy my dear!—Here's Miss Norman and her ladyship, and Sir Walter and the Captain. Set seats in front of the marquee.”

And the fair Amy came curtseying forward like a country actress, over-dressed and over-civil.

“Is that young lady about to enhance the

sports of the day by favouring us with a performance on the rope?" whispered Captain Norman, amazed that a bonnet and feathers, calculated for the meridian of Kensington Gardens, should be thrown away upon a country fair.

"Why do you inquire so?" replied Miss Norman gravely, suspecting, and with truth, that Amy's finery was intended for the captivation of Sir Walter.

"Because she is so much smarter than a lady ought to be, beyond the boundary of Hyde Park Corner. There is something meretricious in gaudy raiment among green trees and hawthorn hedges."

"But as we have no green trees just now, and our hawthorn hedges are not in leaf, Miss Redely's gay dress serves to animate the scene," said Constance, glancing at her own simple mourning habit. "Besides, neither Amy nor I are ever likely to enter the boundary of Hyde Park Corner. Such dissipations as fairs and races form the extent of our opportunity for being fine."

“For pity’s sake do not class yourself with that young person,” cried the Captain, affectedly; and with respect to London, rely upon mine and Sir Walter’s influence to secure your season in town. My mother shall write to Lady Norman. All shall be settled to your satisfaction.”

“If you mean by securing my visit to London, believe me, I have not the slightest inclination to quit Selwood,” replied Constance, feeling it necessary to uphold her mother’s determination.

“My dear Sir Walter, pray come hither and listen to Miss Norman’s extraordinary protestations against London,” cried the Captain, seizing his cousin’s arm and tearing him away from the smiles of the fair Amy.

“Do you imagine that I ever consult the rebellious little puss?” cried Sir Walter, gaily.

“*Who* gave you leave, Constance child, to have an opinion of your own?—I shall dispose of you as I please. Till lawfully married, you are as much my goods and chattels, as the

chairs, tables, and joint-stools of Selwood Manor."

"Miss Norman, why do you allow him to talk so!" cried Amy, joining flippantly in the conversation. "If *I* had a brother, he should do nothing but what pleased and suited me."

"Walter never does anything but what pleases and suits me," burst involuntarily from the lips of Constance.

"*There's* a declaration!—You quite spoil him!—Lady Norman, here is Miss Norman assuring Sir Walter that he is all perfection. If she goes on flattering him at that rate, I'm sure I congratulate his wife."

Lady Norman looked haughtily displeased. Taking the arm of her blushing daughter, she led her away towards old Lady Skaremidge; but as Captain Norman still remained within hearing, she limited her reproof to—"How often must I remind you that there is nothing so ill-bred as for families to group together in mixed company, as if no other person present were worth associating with!—"

Poor Constance proved her susceptibility to

the reproach by devoting herself throughout the remainder of the morning to the Skaremidges, and their less interesting country neighbours. She saw no more of Sir Walter. Sir Robert Skaremidge, old Redely, and an elderly Smith and Thompson or two, soon hurried him off, according to country neighbourhood custom, to hold their private *petitissimo* sessions for deciding upon the malpractices of the *petit* sessions, — grievances of small tithes, tolls, trusts, turnpikemen, and other minute displeasures;—while the young Baronet, moved by the buoyant spirits of his age to escape from the synod of elders, and exercise his observation upon the tastes and dispositions of the populace with a view to providing entertainments for the ensuing festivities at Selwood, shewed evident tokens of impatience, which Lady Norman, whose eyes were seldom diverted from his movements, attributed to his eagerness to rejoin her daughter.

She passed a miserable morning. Thanks to the obsequiousness of the world, she was oftener entertained with panegyrics of Sir Walter than

with any other topic. Her country neighbours fancied themselves sympathizing in the pride of the mother of an only son, by enlarging unceasingly on his perfections. The Skaremidges had their tale to tell of his popularity in Germany. Their dear Lionel's letters were full of the regrets excited by his speedy departure from Munich, and the admiration which, during his brief sojourn, he had called forth. Constance looked piteously towards her mother, to remind her that it was no fault of *hers* these praises were heaped upon Walter; and during the ensuing hour, spent in pretending to be amused by the grotesqueness and humour of the country sports, they had to undergo the congratulations and compliments of every acquaintance present, upon his return in such good looks and charming spirits.

For Sir Walter, having at length extricated himself from the coils of that many-headed hydra, a knot of pottering country-neighbours, was now the life of the fair. He did not choose to remain a fastidious spectator, lest the people should fancy themselves stared at like

wild beasts. While Captain Norman, leaning over Constance, fixed his eye-glass upon their pastimes, Walter was among them, giving prizes to be run for,—purses to be wrestled for,—and dispensing fairings with a liberal hand to all the fullblown belles of the fair. An offering of some kind or other had been already made to every lady belonging to Mrs. Redely's party; but the only object of any value to be found at Avonwell,—a workbox richly mounted,—was presented to Constance. Every one applauded. Every one agreed that, in these times, young men are sad brutes to their sisters; and assured Lady Norman that in this as in all else, her son was a pattern for the rising generation !

“ I do not absolutely approve of Sir Walter's manners !” whispered the Captain to Miss Norman. “ There is a fitness of things even in buying gingerbread at a fair. He is behaving to-day in a manner highly commendable at an election ;—but his deportment is too candidatorial for any ordinary occasion. As a member, it is right to court popularity ; but it is *infra dig.* to seek it as a man. *I* am of opinion that

he degrades himself by going in a roundabout ; and that all this distribution of gingerbread is trivial and out of place.”

In spite of her griefs, Constance found it impossible to resist the gravity with which this oracular speech was delivered ; and Amy, imagining like most ill-bred people that others were as ill-mannered as herself, immediately concluded that Miss Norman’s merriment was excited by something amiss in the arrangements of the day.

It would have been sinful, however, to find fault with the cordial hospitality of the Redelys. As soon as the fair began to grow riotous, the party crossed the meadows towards the Solfatara of Avonwell House ; and the diversions of the day concluded with a dinner which might have done honour to more distinguished establishments. The Spring-chicken was amazed to perceive that the savages, upon whose desert land he was thus accidentally wrecked, participated in those luxuries and improvements of the table which he had conceived to be the privilege of his elect circle.

“How one learns to despise and overthrow one’s idols as one advances in life!”—said he, sententiously. “Among the few objects remaining to my veneration was a well appointed dinner-table. And here is an old Worcestershire cyclop, who drops his hs and wears leather gaiters, with a service nearly as good as Sefton’s!—It is enough to disgust one with human life!—”

Resolved to devote her attention exclusively to her cousin so as to avoid incurring the reprehensions of Lady Norman, Constance rejoiced that the ready flow of his flippancy saved her all necessity for more than a monosyllable in reply.

Accustomed to the glories of conquest, Lady Mornington’s son thought nothing more natural than that the rustic beauty should have fallen a victim to his attractions. Nevertheless, his vanity was gratified. Constance was the prettiest girl he had transfixed for some time past. She was well born, for she was his kith and kin; and in possession of a fortune of thirty thousand pounds, with good expectations. Be-

fore they rose from table, the Spring-chicken admitted to himself that were it possible for a man of his standing about town to perpetrate matrimony, he might almost permit himself to think a second time of his cousin !

CHAPTER VI.

Oh, not my brother!—yet unsay—
God! am I left alone on earth!

BYRON.

WEARY as Constance soon grew of Captain Norman's laborious trifling, she was not sorry to find his stay at Selwood Manor prolonged beyond the four or five days originally specified for the visit. So long as he was there, Lady Norman felt perfectly at her ease. So long as he was there, Constance was at her ease also. With a third person interposed between herself and Sir Walter, she could enjoy his society as heretofore.

The weather was propitious for riding. Spring

was budding in every hedge ; and day after day, the little party set forth to display to the heir presumptive some favourite point of the scenery of Selwood. With the exception of Lady Norman, all were in high spirits. Sir Walter elate with the unmixed happiness of his position ; his cousin with the dawning excitement of a passion which almost dispelled the artificiality of his habits and conversation ; and Constance with the joy of sharing the society of a person tenderly beloved. Her mother was the only person who looked forward with trembling towards the clouds suspended on the verge of their sunshiny horizon !—

“ You had much better remain with us, my dear Norman, till our grand celebration at the end of the month,” said Sir Walter to his cousin, one morning, as they returned from rabbit-shooting, followed at a distance by the keepers. “ In ten days comes Easter, when you will certainly not choose to be in town ; and my birthday falls in the week following.”

“ I have been a week here already, my dear

fellow,” said Captain Norman. “ When I asked you to introduce me to Selwood, I did not intend to set up my staff under your roof-tree !”

“ You could not foresee what inducements you might find. But if you persist in returning to town on Thursday, I shall know that you are afraid to trust your toryism in the same house with Avesford. I am convinced you hate my uncle as a radical, and despise him as a *roturier*. ”

“ On the contrary,” replied Norman,—rousing his courage for a vast effort,—“ I should be gratified to make the acquaintance of one of the most eminent men of the day. I have heard wonders of Mr. Avesford’s value from Lady Audley, who lives near him; and he was devilish civil and hospitable to little Quickset, of ours, when he was recruiting in his neighbourhood.”

“ Behold Dalhousie, the great god of war,
Lieutenant-Colonel to the Earl of Mar !”

cried Sir Walter, laughing. “ But no matter whether his politeness to little Quickset, or his

legislative eminence have succeeded in soothing your animosities ; only stay and humanize among us. You will have plenty of time to perform quarantine and wipe the guilty spot from off your hand before the commencement of the London season. *Foi d'honnête homme*, I will never reveal in decent society that you rusticated more than a day or two with your country cousins !—”

“ Avesford is guardian to Miss Norman, I think, as well as to yourself ?” inquired the Spring-chicken, trying to look unconcerned.

“ Yes, to both of us ; and a kinder or more conscientious never existed,” cried Sir Walter. “ If you knew what pains he has taken to make me see things with my own eyes, and judge matters with my own judgment, instead of playing the pacha with me ;—keeping down my selfish pride and encouraging only a proper consciousness of my position and its responsibilities. If ever I am worth more than this dockweed,” cried he, whipping off the first green head that presented itself,—“ it will be thanks to Avesford !”

“ Do us the justice to ascribe *something* to the influence of honourable ancestorship, or

Newmarket goes for nothing !” remonstrated Captain Norman. — “ Bit, bridle, and spur, have done their part, perhaps, but blood was the foundation of all !”—And the diminutive captain, whose air and proportions resembled those of a bantam chick, drew up with an attempt to prove by the outward and visible signs of aristocraticism, that he was able to count quarterings with any German prince of the empire ; while Norman six feet high, and endowed with the form of Theseus, presented the model of a demigod rather than of the outcast of a foundling hospital. No one, accidentally viewing the two cousins, would have suspected that the puny captain was the legitimate heir of Selwood ;—the noble Walter an ignoble interloper.—

Captain Norman’s next topic of discourse was more to the taste of his companion. He began suddenly to enlarge upon the merits of Miss Norman.

“ Yet according to *your* theory,” cried Sir Walter, “ Constance’s pretensions ought not to

stand on the same line with those of Lord Farleigh's insignificant daughters?—”

“ You totally misapprehend me !” cried his cousin. “ The Farleighs are nobodies. The Farleighs would scarcely obtain admission into a German chapter. The first Lord Selsdon was a city knight of the time of James the first; when the Normans of Selwood Manor were almost in their decadence.”

“ And yet an English Earl with such an estate as *his*——”

“ My dear Sir Walter,” interrupted the Captain, “ I know an English Earl, with twice the Selsdon rent-roll, whose grandfather was an Irish soap-boiler !”

“ What then ?—Are not all honours *bubbles* !” cried Sir Walter, laughing heartily at his cousin's vehemence, while Captain Norman seized the opportunity of his jocularly to revert to his lovely cousin.

“ After all,” said he, “ perhaps Lady Norman is prudent in declining to take your sister to town. She would lose so lovely a creature the

first season; and an only daughter is not so easily parted with. A single subscription at Almack's would secure a match for Miss Norman."

"If it were my sister's object to secure a match," said Walter, stiffly, "she need not travel so far as King Street to accomplish it. Constance might have been a marchioness, without approaching London so near as Hounslow!"

"A *marquise*, perhaps you mean?" said the Captain; conjecturing that his cousin might have brought over some needy *Chevalier d'Industrie* among his foreign curiosities.

"No,—I mean a *Marchioness*. It is not three months since she refused St. Aubyn, at Tuxwell Park."

"Good God!—and before she had seen a person likely to engage her affections!" cried Norman. "Such a proceeding could only arise from being too little worldly, or too much. Either she was unable to appreciate the advantage of such a connexion, or was in hopes of doing better."

“Neither one nor the other,” replied Sir Walter. “She did not like Lord St Aubyn.”

“Like him!—But what woman is *expected* to like a Marquis with sixty thousand a-year?—”

“An *honest* one, I should imagine, if she consent to marry him,” cried Sir Walter, almost nettled. “After all, what inducement but inclination ought to tempt Constance to change her situation? What can she desire that she does not enjoy at Selwood?—She has only to name the whim that enters her head, and if in my power to gratify, her brother is far more likely to secure it to her than her husband. My mother adores her as I do. From the moment I become my own master, I shall take care that my sister enjoys as much independence as is compatible with the customs of the world. She shall have her own servants,—her own horses.—My mother has not worn jewels since her widowhood. Constance is welcome to the family diamonds. There is nothing, in short, she could ask or order, which is not at her disposal.”

“ You almost alarm me,” said the Spring-chicken, in a half-embarrassed manner. “ It is unnecessary, I suspect, to apprize you of the impression produced upon my feelings by Miss Norman. But how can I presume to offer her a share of *my* humble prospects, while she possesses the command of a home and heart such as you state to be at her command?—”

“ Were Constance disposed in your favour,” replied Sir Walter, betraying, by an irrepressible start, his surprise at this sudden turn of the conversation, “ your prospects, either as Lord Mornington’s son, or eventual heir to my property, are such as she has no right to disregard. But as my sister’s feelings towards you are purely those of a friend,—a relative——”

“ You are not, I imagine, an unerring judge on such points,” interrupted Captain Norman, with a smile. “ At all events, it is only from Miss Norman’s lips that I shall consider the decree decisive.”

“ Do not expose yourself to unnecessary mortification,” cried Sir Walter.—“ I stake my

life that Constance Norman has not yet seen the man she would be disposed to marry."

"*Ne gagez pas !*" replied Captain Norman, looking almost as simple as the heroine whose words he quoted.

"Do you empower me to ask her the question !" demanded his cousin.

"Thank you.—It were perhaps rash to hazard the insertion of my name in her list of rejections next to that of the Marquis of St. Aubyn. Besides, Lord Mornington, though as little apt as most men to interfere in the affairs of his wife or son, might think it necessary to play paternal, and resent my having taken such a step without previously consulting him."

"Lord Mornington, I should imagine, would scarcely object to Miss Norman, of Selwood, as a daughter-in-law?" observed Sir Walter, proudly.

"He might object to having a daughter-in-law at all."

"Then why apply to me till you had obtained is sanction to your addresses?"—cried Walter

with increasing irritation. “Did you fancy the honour would be too great for our fortitude if it burst upon us too suddenly?—”

“I hoped you would give me such encouragement,” replied Norman, with gentlemanly forbearance, “as might justify my applying for the consent of Lord and Lady Mornington. I hoped you would, at least, shew so much courtesy as to say that *you* did not object to me as a brother-in-law.”

“I have spoken hastily,” cried Sir Walter, with his usual warm-hearted candour. “But the truth is, I cannot readily reconcile myself to the prospects of *any* match for my sister. Constance is everything to *me*; and I have made up my mind that, so long as she remains single, I will indulge no thoughts of marriage. Where shall I ever find so sweet a companion,—so docile, so affectionate? In comparison with my sister, all women appear to me coarse in person and mind;—and Selwood would become a wilderness, were she taken from it to preside over a house of her own!—”


“Nevertheless, it is an event that must occur,” said Captain Norman, coolly.


“Why *must* it?—Are there not thousands of examples, especially in Catholic families, of women preferring a single life?—”

“Miss Norman is too lovely and too womanly to devote herself to a vocation so unnatural as that of a lay nun,” said the Captain. “Be assured, however, that you have said enough to determine me to pause ere I open negotiations with Lord Mornington.”

“I—my dear fellow?—What have I said?—Nothing, I hope, to cast any disparagement upon your pretensions?—You are at liberty to address my sister,—at liberty to repeat to her every syllable I have uttered,—at liberty to—”

“We are both of us getting a little warm,” observed Captain Norman, affecting to recover his self-possession; “which is not surprising, considering the glowing nature of our subject. At all events, suffer me to beg that it may be dropped for the present. It is my intention to depart for London early to-morrow. When

you hear from me again, I shall have learned whether it is in my father's power or pleasure, to  me in a position entitling me to offer proposals, likely to effect an alteration in your views touching the disposal of our lovely Constance. By the way, had we not better discharge our guns before we approach too near the house?—”

 Sir Walter understood this as a peremptory dismissal of the question. His blood was boiling. He could scarcely command himself to behave with common civility to Captain Norman in the space that intervened between them and the house.

“As I depart so soon, it would be but decent, I believe, to ride as far as Scarwell Park, and make my excuses for not dining with your friend, Sir Robert Skaremidge, on Saturday?”—said Captain Norman, perceiving by the turret clock of the offices that two awkward hours were still to elapse previous to the ringing of the dressing-bell. But Sir Walter, though approving the proposal, and accompanying his cousin to the stables to order one

of his finest horses brought round and his own groom to be in attendance, said not a word of bearing him company.

No sooner had the discomfited visitor attired himself in visiting guise and departed, than Sir Walter, finding his mother engaged with a visit from the old maiden sister of the vicar of Selwood, put his head unceremoniously into the drawing-room and invited his sister to walk with him.—

“Constance ! I want to speak to you,—I have something very particular to say to you,” cried he, in so peremptory a tone of voice that Lady Norman had not courage to interpose an interdiction.

“Put on your hat and shawl, and come and walk with me in the shrubbery,” said he, the moment the drawing-room door closed behind her ;—and in a few minutes, Constance was proceeding on his arm along the yew-walk, scarcely able to keep pace with his precipitate footsteps.

“You said you wanted to speak to me,” faltered Miss Norman, after some hesitation. “Has anything unpleasant occurred ?”

“ Nothing—nothing of any consequence. I only wished, my dear Constance, to ask you a few questions important to *your* happiness—important to mine.”

An idea glanced into the mind of Miss Norman, that a suspicion of the fatal secret with which she had been recently entrusted, might have reached Sir Walter. “ Ask nothing,” said she, “ which I am not at perfect liberty to disclose. Even *you*, Walter, have no right to exact from me a breach of promise.—”

“ Of promise ?”—he repeated, unconscious of the error into which she had fallen. “ Surely you cannot have already entangled yourself. Surely you cannot, previous to my return to England, have pledged your word to ——.”

“ *Not* previous to your return to England.”

“ And *since*,—whom have you seen likely to engage your affections ?—Sir Frederick Cranstoun ? No ?—Surely Norman cannot be justified in his assertion of having made an impression on your feelings ?—I will not believe it of you !—A prating, self-sufficient coxcomb !”

“ We misunderstood each other I fancy,” said

Constance, greatly relieved. “If you would inquire whether I entertain a personal regard for Captain Norman, your previous warning that such a connexion would be displeasing to you, ought to afford you sufficient assurance to the contrary.”

“You mean, then, that had I *not* intimated my disapproval, you would have received his attentions with pleasure !—”

“Not under any possible sanction or circumstances,” replied Miss Norman, warmly. “Even had you and mamma *recommended* my cousin to my acceptance, I could not have overcome my repugnance to his affectation, and overweening notions of his own consequence.”

“I expected as much of you,” cried Sir Walter, seizing his sister’s hand and shaking it as he would have done that of a young friend of his own age and sex. “And yet, that fellow’s cool, deliberate way of asserting his hopes sufficed to put me out of temper. The fool is persuaded he has only to propose and be accepted—*accepted* at a moment’s notice, and after a week’s acquaintance, by Constance Norman !—”

“ Perhaps he is wise enough to guess that a longer acquaintance would be still less favourable to his views,” replied Constance, smiling at the impetuosity of her companion. “ But now or at any future time, my feelings towards Captain Norman would be the same; I could neither like him as a lover nor respect him as a husband.”

“ I was sure of it—I was quite sure of it!—There is even less to commend in *him* than in Lord St. Aubyn. St. Aubyn knows nothing of the world, and *may* improve. Norman is self-sufficient and unimprovable.”

“ Both, however, are equally remote from my standard of merit,” replied Constance, more gravely. “ Nor is it likely I shall ever see it attained by mortal man. This is no discouragement. I am too happy at home to have the smallest wish to leave Selwood.”

“ Thanks, *thanks!*”—cried Sir Walter. “ To own the truth, it would go to my heart, Constance, to part with you. You are only seventeen. You have at least four years before

you, to form a wise and prudent choice; four happy years, my dear sister, during which, I promise you all the fondness, all the consideration, necessary to your comfort. Secondary only to my mother, you are mistress here. Say whom you wish to be invited to Selwood,—whom you wish to be dismissed from our acquaintance,—and, reasonable or *unreasonable*, your desire shall be fulfilled!—There is no cost or sacrifice at which I would not secure the companionship of my dear and only sister, without which my existence would become a blank.”

“You will form other attachments,—you will marry ——”

“No! A married life has no temptations for me. I have so reverential an estimation of the claims and ties of matrimony, that were I really to marry, I should become a slave,—a non-entity. But, thank Heaven, I am on my guard. All I hear see and read, of the manœuvres of fashionable mothers and the practices of fashionable wives, convinces me that it must be a rare exception which ought to cheat

a man out of his liberty. Such instances as I knew abroad,—such instances as the Morningtons lately pointed out to me in London!—”

“ It is the interest of the Morningtons to disgust you with matrimony. Had they chosen, they might have pointed out happy and respectable couples.—”

“ Very few, I suspect, according to my appreciation of happiness,” interrupted Sir Walter.

“ You have formed exaggerated notions, perhaps, concerning the bliss of married life,” said Miss Norman.

“ I have !”—replied he, with enthusiasm. “ I have pictured to myself a wife, beautiful, gentle, and innocent, as Constance Norman, and prudent and high-principled as her mother. To such a woman, I should surrender the guidance of my life without reserve ; and *from* such a woman, should exact an attachment great in proportion to the surrender of my whole existence—my time,—my will,—my thoughts,—my hopes,—my conduct.”

“ Even wedded to such a paragon as you describe,” observed Constance, smiling, “ I

should doubt the discretion of such a passion. A man is, and ought to be, the head of the house. In *his* hands should its authority be vested. Such is the law of man,—such the law of God; and it will grieve me should I live to see you despised as under female domination.”

“Secure me from it, then, by a promise to remain with me at Selwood?—”

“What better can I desire!” exclaimed Constance. But the expression of countenance with which her avowal was received, induced her to qualify the hasty pledge by a reference to the will of her mother. “So long as mamma pleases to reside with you, and to allow me free liberty in the rejection of any offer that may present itself”—said she.

“I will have no reserves,” cried Sir Walter. “As your brother, I am entitled to as much confidence as you accord to your mother. She cannot love you better,—she cannot be more disposed to promote your happiness.”

“Her life has been devoted to me. A mother’s rights—forgive me—*are* more imperative than your own,” replied Miss Norman,

gravely. "But subject only to the restrictions she may place upon my conduct, I promise all that you require."

It was fortunate for Miss Norman that she had resumed her usual composure of demeanour; for Lady Norman, having at length got rid of her guest, was at this moment advancing towards them, with anxiety and suspicion in her looks.

CHAPTER VII.

Toi seul, triste martyre de ta sombre prudence,
Toi seul ne connaît pas la douce confiance !—
En vain de ton secret tu te sens opprimer.
Au sein de quelques amis l'oses tu verser ?
Des plus mortels poisons l'abeille fait son miel,
Toi, du plus doux objet tu composes ton fiel.

DELILLE.

OFTEN did the unhappy mother, after having suffered her anxieties to betray her into harshness towards her idolized child, retire to her room to indulge in solitary tears and atone by self-reproach the injustice of her conduct.—Lady Norman knew that her cares, and the violence into which they sometimes stimulated a naturally amiable character, were but the after-

fruits of her fault,—a fault how fertile in mischiefs and troubles of every gradation of bitterness.

All that she was able to extract from Constance, when continuing their walk together after the departure of Sir Walter, concerning the object of his indecorous summons, was an admission that Captain Norman had made him the confidant of an intention to tender proposals for her hand. The announcement, however, made at dinner by the Spring-chicken of his intended departure on the morrow, and a sudden resumption of his original flippancy and impertinence, satisfied Lady Norman that he *had* proposed and been rejected; and when again alone with her daughter, she did not disguise her indignation at finding her opinion and authority set at nought in the family.

“Did Sir Walter Norman imagine,” said she, “that I should place any restraint upon your decision on such a point?—Should *I* have left you less at liberty than he has done to reject a man whom I know to be the object of your contempt?”

“Certainly not, dear mamma. But as my cousin probably felt more at ease in conversing with my broth—with Sir Walter, it was natural that the affair should be discussed between them. To *my* judgment it was never even referred. I believe Sir Walter contrived to make Captain Norman sensible that his suit was not likely to be acceptable.”

“And what right had he to take so much upon himself, without consulting either of us?”

“My indifference towards Captain Norman must have been evident to the whole house; and Walter did not wish to keep him in unnecessary suspense.”

“No!—he chose to dismiss him with a degree of precipitation and discourtesy which has sent him off infuriated to London, and made the Morningtons our enemies for life!—Sir Walter Norman may live to repent having provoked so dangerous and potent an adversary.”

“I trust not,—I earnestly trust not!” said

Constance, turning pale. "It would be hard, indeed, if Walter's care for my happiness were to operate to his disadvantage."

No further reference was made to the origin of disagreement; but the excitement of Lady Norman's temper and the alteration of her manner, could not have failed to attract the attention of Sir Walter, but that his time was devoted to the preparations and arrangements contingent upon the attainment of his majority. A political dinner, too, was about to take place in a neighbouring county, of which his uncle Cruttenden Maule, was one of the stewards, and to which the presence of Sir Walter Norman (as a hoped-for member of the radical party) was solicited. Either through inadvertence or disinclination the letter of invitation remained unanswered; and Cruttenden, who had not visited Selwood Manor since his nephew's arrival in England, accordingly made his appearance to reprove, congratulate, and renew his solicitations. Though affectionately welcomed by Lady Norman and Constance,

they could not but secretly rejoice that the inbreak of the thundering radical had not occurred during the visit of the fastidious Springchicken.

“Where’s Walter?”—cried Crutt, after having hastily returned their greeting. “Pray why didn’t he answer our letter?—”

“What letter?”

“An invitation from the stewards of the Free Union!—”

“Walter is much engaged just now with his tenants and bailiffs,” said Lady Norman, calmly. “I dare say it escaped his memory.”

“It *ought* not to have escaped his memory!—” cried Cruttenden, warmly. “I’ll answer for it ’tis the most important letter the post has brought him since he returned to Selwood!—I hope, Matty, you’re not trying to make a milk-sop of the lad?—”

“If you mean by interference with his political opinions,” replied Lady Norman, “you must be well aware, my dear Cruttenden, that I have submitted entirely to the intentions of Sir Richard

by committing his son to the control and guidance of my brother Avesford."

"Ay, ay!—left him to become a pitiful half-and-half,—neither fish, flesh, nor good red-herring," cried Crutt. "As if the misfortune of being a born Frenchman wasn't enough, without adding the disgrace of being a bred-trimmer,—a luke-warm, spiritless creatur', without wit to be one thing or t'other!—"

"But Walter *is* one very decided thing, uncle," interrupted Miss Norman. "I heard your friend Mr. Redely calling him to task for having declared himself a moderate whig, and announced at some public meeting his intention of standing on those principles at the next dissolution."

"The devil he did!"—cried Crutt, not allowing time to Lady Norman to rebuke the unbecoming interposition of her daughter.—"Then tell Master Walter from me, that he may look sharp about him.—By Jove! if Redely were only to stand against him, the young gentleman would soon find that the Norman interest isn't what it was in this part of the country, twenty

year ago. Look at the strength that has started up—Look at Redely and the money turned at the Forges ! Look at the new population betwixt this and Scarwell Park !—The Normans have gone down twenty per cent.; and unless Walter should turn out something stancher than there's reason to hope for to bring matters round again, he may go and play clerk to parson Avesford's preaching in the House, and devil a thought the country will be ever the better or wiser for either of 'em !—”

“ No real friend of Sir Walter would desire to see him take a violent part in politics,” observed Lady Norman. “ It belongs neither to his age nor position in life.”

“ *Violent !*—women call everything violent that goes beyond the humdrum opinions of their great grandmothers ; as the Sussex fishermen call it blowing a gale, when there's wind enough to put out a farthing rushlight. As to his position in life, old Crutt always swore you were just the woman to be cramming the lad's head with absurd notions of that kind. Avesford's twaddle distanced *me* with Walter, and now *your* twaddle

is distancing Avesford ; and between you both, my nephew will dwindle into a poor pitiful do-nothing, like the rest of 'em !”

The moment Sir Walter made his appearance, these charges were renewed against himself. Even the frank, good-humoured vivacity of his nephew's welcome, could not immediately subdue the spleen of the Mirabeau of Soho.

“ It wont do, my lad !”—said Crutt. “ All the cousin-come-over-me in the world isn't worth the plain ay or no which explains whether a man's with one or against one !—”

“ Whether a *member* is with you or against you, perhaps,” said Walter, laughing. “ But surely a *man* may find a mezzo-termine between *as-sent* and *dis-sent*—to express that he approves your good things, and eschews your evil ones ?—Tell me truly, uncle !—Did not that superannuated spirit of mischief, that Methuselah of spite and contrariety, Tom Cruttenden,—who still sits cowering over the hearth raking up coals of strife in the family, suggest that now or never was the time to snatch me, like a brand

out of the fire ;—and having rescued me from Avesford's clutches, make a radical of me for life ?”

“ Never mind who suggested it—I am here now, and ask you a plain answer to a plain question.—Do you consider vote by ballot a final measure ?”

“ What *do* I consider, eh, Constance ?” cried Sir Walter, turning to his sister, and affecting to parry by a jest an interrogatory which he felt that his uncle had no right to press in so peremptory a manner. “ You know I have promised to have no political opinions but yours. What am I, my dear ?—whig or tory,—conservative or destructive ?—I pause for a reply.”

Cruttenden Maule had sense enough to perceive that his nephew did not choose to commit himself by a premature and gratuitous profession of political faith. But Lady Norman, whose mind was biassed by a ruling passion, saw fit to take the sportive sally of the young Baronet *au pied de la lettre* ; and her reprehensions of his levity were so intemperate that, long before they

were concluded, her brother was the first to propose to Walter to adjourn to the park, and view the recent improvements.

“Matty, I see (like all the women that ever were born,) is unwilling to part with an inch of authority without a struggle!”—cried Crutten-den, as he trudged along by his nephew’s side towards the new pheasantries. “I saw by her letters that matters were not running smooth between you. The moment old Tom heard of her intention of quitting Selwood, ‘Mark my words, Crutt,’ says he, ‘the young spark and the dowager have had a tussle, and she’s retreating in time from the field, to save the shame of being packed off!’—”

“In God’s name, what can you mean!”—cried Sir Walter, greatly astonished. “There has not been the slightest misunderstanding between my mother and myself. She is sometimes peevish with my sister, (*why*, I can scarcely tell you, for Constance has the most angelic temper upon earth!) but with *me* she has been ever on the best of terms.”

“Well, then, I suppose it is with a view to

keeping so, that my sister has made up her mind to come and settle at Halsewell Lodge.”

“ You are growing more and more unintelligible !”—cried Sir Walter, in some agitation.

“ Why, don’t you recollect the shooting-box I built about ten years ago, which, when it was finished, old Crutt would never set foot in ’cause he swore it was damp ?”

“ Yes, I remember Halsewell.”

“ I had tenants in the house till last summer. But they quitted at Michaelmas ; and about Christmas time, Matty, seeing an advertisement of Halsewell in the county paper to be let or sold, wrote to me, making a handsome *bid*. Of course, it wasn’t a thing to be heard of to let money pass betwixt brother and sister ; and for a week or two, we were on and about it ’cause *I* would not hear of rent, nor *she* of living there without ;—and all was to be kept such a grand secret, that there was no chance of a mutual friend bringing us to an understanding. Well, —to make an end on’t,—I had a deed of gift drawn up, making over the place to Constance ; and, you see, poor Matty had no right to refuse

during the girl's minority. After all the words that had passed, the property wasn't valued at four thousand pounds; and surely a man, without chick or child belonging to him, has a right to expect his sister or niece will accept that much of him,—eh?—”

“ Yes,—no!—I was not thinking of the place!” cried young Norman, with considerable emotion. “ *Has* Constance been artful enough to conceal all this from me!—”

“ As far as I know, the girl is still in the dark. For some foolish reason or other, Matty has chosen to make a mystery of the business,—even from the Avesfords,—even from my niece;—and though, of course, I am glad enough for my own sake to have them come and settle in what I may call my neighbourhood, I can understand that my sister may be inclined to keep her scheme snug, for fear of the opposition it was like to meet with from Constance. As to *you*, I thought you were at the bottom of all.”

“ Could you for a moment suppose that I was coinciding in a project which is to deprive me of the society of those who are nearest and

dearest to me ?"—cried Sir Walter, with indignation.

" You really had no finger in the pie ?—Then please to recollect," said Cruttenden Maule, " that what I have let out is in strictest confidence. Matty would never forgive me, if she knew I had betrayed her secret."

" But in return, you must promise to remonstrate with her, my dear uncle, as of your own accord. You must represent to her the impropriety of removing my sister from Selwood ; and the scandal it will create in the world, should it be supposed that my conduct towards my mother has been such as to compel her to fly from Selwood Manor !—God knows my affection for my family is unbounded !—God knows I have never intentionally given offence to either one of them ; and if I have accidentally erred, I am willing, for the peace of my own conscience as well as to restore a good understanding between us, to humble myself to the most abject apologies to my mother !—You must tell her all this.—"

" My dear Walter, compose yourself !" cried

his good-natured uncle, with much concern, “ I’m sure I’m heartily sorry I’ve said anything to vex you. It’s no fault of yours that Matty chooses to live independent; nor no news to you, I should think, that,—give women their way so much as you will,—they’ll always find some pretext or another for flying off into their tantrums !—”

“ But my mother is so reasonable,—so amenable to argument !—Were you even now to point out to her the consequences——”

“ She might take it into her head that I repented what she calls my generosity, and that I want to dissuade her from inhabiting Halsewell. Wait till Avesford (who had always the greatest influence with her) comes down from town.”

“ I cannot wait *a day* !”—cried Sir Walter, gasping for breath.

“ Then write, and get him (without committing *me*) to expostulate with her by letter.”

“ I must see Constance—I must consult Constance.—Indeed you must permit me to entrust this matter to my sister.—I assure you, my dear uncle, her discretion may be relied on.”

“ So you seemed to think when you referred your choice of party to her,” cried Cruttenden, laughing at his nephew’s vehemence. “ The discretion of a little mind of seventeen !—”

“ Consider that from her infancy she has been the companion of my mother. Perfect reliance is to be placed on Constance !—”

“ Well, well ! I take her prudence upon your word. Matilda appears to me, just now, to be fretful and out of spirits ; and it is not for *me*, to whom she has always been a kind, affectionate sister, to aggravate her anxieties. Nothing must transpire till she sees fit to acquaint you with her projects,—least of all, while I remain in the house.”

Already, Maule had agreed to sleep at Selwood, and proceed on his way towards the Union meeting, early on the morrow ; but a dull constrained evening, spent with the disunited family, made him repent his resolution. The moment Lady Norman and her daughter retired for the night, Sir Walter recommenced his inquiries of his uncle. As yet, he had been unable to obtain even a momentary in-

interview with Constance; but having received from Maule deliberate confirmation of all he asserted in the morning touching Lady Norman's determination to quit Selwood, he fancied that a few minutes' conference with his sister would enable him to determine the real state of his mother's intentions.

"Constance can't be asleep yet," said his uncle. "Go up to her room and talk the matter over with her. I will smoke a cigar while you are away. In this room, the nuisance is allowed."

"You shall have your cigar," replied Norman, rising and opening a fresh case of Havannahs for his uncle. "But I fear I shall not be admitted to my sister. It is contrary to my mother's rule for me to enter their rooms."

"Stuff and nonsense!"—cried Cruttenden, proceeding to light his cigar. "How long has Matty grown so damned prudish?—I'm sure she didn't learn the lesson at home. *We* boys used to run in and out of hers and Bessy's rooms just as we pleased."

"Because you *were* boys. *My* presence

would be a restraint. I think her regulation a good one ; but there can be surely no harm in breaking through it on so particular an occasion."

" Pho, pho, pho !—to be sure not,"—cried Crutt, more intent on the delicious fumes of his cigar, than on weighing the proprieties of the case. " If I had not set in for a comfortable smoke, I'd go with you myself. Matty would scarcely find fault with *my* visiting either of their Blue chambers !—And now, be off with you, Walter ; for I should like to hear the upshot of all these mysteries before I sleep.—"

The door leading to Miss Norman's apartment opened into the same corridor with that of her mother ;—but a small ante-chamber and dressing-room intervened between Lady Norman's bedroom and the gallery ; so that, once retired, she was not likely to be disturbed by the opening of her daughter's door. Though sleepless on an uneasy pillow, not a murmur reached her ear of the discussion that now arose between Constance and her brother ;—the latter earnestly entreating the former as earnestly de-

clining, a few minutes' conversation.—Miss Norman, attired in her dressing-gown, stood at the half-open door, entreating Sir Walter would retire; unwilling to grant a concession she was certain her mother would disapprove.

“My *dear* sister,—I ask but for five minutes. I beseech you let me in for five minutes.—The matter is one which regards the happiness of our future life,”—cried Walter. And such was the despair painted in his countenance, that Miss Norman, dreading lest something connected with the secret of his birth might have accidentally transpired, hesitated no longer.

“Lose no further time,”—said he, gently pushing open the door of the ante-room, and closing it behind him. “Cruttenden is waiting to hear the result of what I have to say to you.”—And Constance, conceiving that Lady Norman's objections were directed against unreserved communication between them in any time or place, renounced all further opposition, and took a seat beside Walter, who had already thrown himself into a chair.

“Constance!”—was his first scarcely articulate ejaculation. “*Are* you in this accursed plot against my peace?—”

“Compose yourself, dearest Walter,” said she. “All I said this morning I am ready to confirm.—Whatever may transpire, I shall ever entertain for you the fond affection of a sister.”

“Yet you are about to sanction a measure that will drive me forth from Selwood for ever!—For I *will* quit the place.—The moment Lady Norman reveals her secret to the family, I bid adieu to my home—I bid adieu to my country. Since she disdains to receive from me the love and duty of a son,—I will fly from England,—visit the country of my birth, and——”

“Alas ! alas ! by what cruel accident has this fatal secret transpired !”—cried Miss Norman, losing all self-possession.

“You knew it then, Constance ;—you knew it this very morning when I was pouring out my whole soul to you ;—yet you disdained to enlighten me.—It was by others I was to be apprized of the cruel truth !”

“ God forbid that I should be the first to pronounce the decree which, after so many years of affection, renders us strangers to each other !” cried Miss Norman, wildly.

Sir Walter gazed upon her in silent amazement.

“ Surely, surely,” she continued, tears now pouring down her cheeks, “ since it was my father’s will that you should assume the rights and title of his son, the choice which invested you with the empty gifts of fortune, entitled you also to my sisterly affection ?—Since my knowledge of this hateful, fatal secret, my attachment, dearest Walter, has rather augmented than diminished !—Compassion seems to soften my heart with new tenderness towards you.—I feel not only for the bitterness of the false position in which you have been placed, but for the privations awaiting you.—For I *know*, Walter, —I know as surely as if you had already said it,—that the moment which revealed to you this cruel mystery, determined you to fling aside the fictitious honours imposed by others upon your acceptance.”

“ How long have you known this, Constance, —and from whom did you learn it ?” —gasped Sir Walter, upon whose bewildered mind terrific light was now breaking.

“ From my mother !—She revealed all to me during your absence in town.”

“ She told you that I was not her son ?” —demanded Sir Walter, growing paler and more haggard, while Constance replied by a mournful sign of assent. “ But did she tell you *who* were my parents ?—Bereaved in one moment of all that I hold dear on earth,—my kinship with her and you, — has she bestowed nothing upon me in return ?—Did she leave me none to love—none—none to love me ?—”

He paused. “ She said that you were a foundling,” murmured Constance, “ born of foreign parents, and adopted by my father at Paris as heir of Selwood.”

“ French parents !” —murmured the unfortunate young man. “ Such parents as could sell their child to be the innocent object of a fraud !—Outcasts,—perhaps beggars,—bought to consent to their disgrace and their son’s undoing !—”

Instinctively Miss Norman approached her beloved Walter, and entwined her hands caressingly round his arm.—His first movement was to unclasp them, and repel her advances. “You are no longer my sister,” said he, “I must not presume to tender you the endearments of an equal !—”

“As a brother, you are still beloved ;—as a brother, you will ever, *ever* be beloved !”—exclaimed Constance, again clasping her hands together, yet almost overpowered by his harshness. “Do the years we have passed together plead nothing in my favour ! You *are* my brother, Walter !—No longer the heir of Selwood, but still my beloved brother !—”

“Reflect on what you promise,” cried he, throwing himself distractedly on the sofa, and drawing her towards him. “Think on how ignominious a wretch you may perhaps be lavishing your tenderness !—The blood of robbers,—swindlers,—murderers,—may be in my veins ;—the blood of wretches who, having lost their honest name, ended by making a traffic of their child !”

“ No,—do not suppose it !”—exclaimed Miss Norman, attempting to soothe by the most affectionate gentleness the frenzy of her companion.—“ There is nothing in your heart—your mind—your nature—but what is good and noble,—noble with the nobility of the Almighty’s own creation !—When did you ever entertain a base intention, or a mean opinion?—you *are* noble, dearest Walter.—Something in my inmost breast assures me that you are come of gentle race.”

Softened by her caresses, though still wild with perplexity and wonder, Walter passed his hand over his forehead, and tried to compose his bewildered senses sufficiently to determine what course was next to be pursued. But the effort only served to render him more frantic.

“ You have been sporting with my fortitude, Constance !”—cried he, suddenly bursting into a convulsive laugh, as retrospective thoughts seemed for a moment to restore the stability of his former position. “ Own that you have been trifling with me !—Own that I have borne my trial well !—But no !”—cried he, smiting his brow

with his clenched hands, as he obtained in a view of Miss Norman's mournful countenance fatal confirmation of the reality of his misfortune.—“It is all too true. I have no sister—no mother—no home—no country!—What have I done to be thus miserably degraded?”

“Walter, Walter! have pity on yourself and me,” cried Miss Norman, throwing her arms around him. “Meet this reverse as becomes a man—as becomes the character you have borne among us. In losing all else, do not forfeit our respect. Your change of circumstances can effect no shadow of change in our affection, unless by effacing the precious qualities which have long rendered you so dear!”

“Constance,” faltered her agonized companion, folding her closely to his bosom, as if fearing that already she was about to be torn from him for ever. “You were the dearest blessing of my day of prosperity;—of my adversity, be the consoling angel.”

He could add no more. Lady Norman,

with stern indignation in her looks, stood beside them. Roused from her pillow by the elevated tones of the excited Walter, she had rushed into her daughter's room.

“Are we not a moment safe from these intrusions?” cried she. “Is not even my daughter's chamber sacred at midnight, with the whole family retired to rest?—Sir Walter!—I have but a few more weeks to remain under your roof, and I entreat you, I command you—I entreat you as a friend, I command you as a mother—shew some respect for the decencies of society—shew——”

“Madam,” replied he, with stern gravity, “the time is over for such words as these to pass between us. Appeal to me no more as a son, but as a wretch whom your wilfulness has raised above his humble condition only to dash him down to destruction. My existence has been marred by the caprices of others. Do not augment my degradation by the mockery of thus addressing me. I have *no* roof, *no* mother!—I know all.—*You* are still the Lady Norman

whom I have idolized and venerated;—*I* the miserable outcast on whom you have lavished such cruel kindness.—”

A shriek from Constance, whose eyes were fixed upon Lady Norman’s ghastly face, suspended all further remonstrance on the lips of Walter.

“What is all this?”—cried Cruttenden Maule, who, weary of waiting for his nephew, was come in search of him. “My niece in tears?—my sister—Walter, what means this disturbance?”

“It means,” cried the unfortunate Walter Norman, falling on his neck and sobbing aloud, “that I have lost all,—that I am losing my reason!—Recoil from me,—cast me forth as an impostor!—I am *not* the son of Sir Richard Norman—I am *not* the rightful heir of Selwood!—”

CHAPTER VIII.

Oh ! mother,—yet no mother !

SAVAGE.

THAT night was spent in earnest conference between Walter and the brother of Lady Norman. Cruttenden Maule's personal recollections readily supplied corroboration of the facts imparted to Constance by her mother. He was now only surprised that suspicions on the subject had never before presented themselves to his mind.

“ I wish to heaven,” cried Crutt, with cordial frankness, after due discussion of the affair, “ that since my sister ever chose to lend her sanction to a gross imposition, she had kept to

herself a secret of which she had allowed the mischiefs to take root and make head !”

“ It is never too late for reparation of a fault,” said Walter, firmly.

“ And I heartily wish further,” continued Cruttenden, “ that Avesford was here this moment to offer you advice instead of *me*. My brother’s head is a better one than mine. I only wish Avesford was here !—”

“ What advice do I require to teach me to act like an honest man ?”—cried Walter. “ All that remains for me is to signify to the rightful heir,—to Lord Mornington,—the discovery that has taken place, and resign the honours of which I have so long defrauded him.”

“ That is just the point on which I would not have you act uncounselled. I very much doubt whether Matty’s unsupported declaration suffices, in a *legal* view of the case, to invalidate a legal certificate of your birth, signed by Sir Richard Norman and attesting witnesses. If it were so, any woman, after losing her husband, might disinherit one child in favour of another.”

“ It is only under circumstances of time and place so peculiar as those attending my birth, that such a fraud could be attempted,” observed Walter. “ In ordinary cases, there are so many family witnesses——”

“ But in the present (which is all we need consider), supposing the courts of law decide that Matty’s declaration is insufficient, and that it proves impossible to obtain confirmatory testimony, to what purpose bring all this scandalous history under the observation of the world, if your title is found legal ?”

“ Because no testimony is wanting to confirm to *me* the simple word of Lady Norman. If you could but guess the pang that embitters my feelings in losing the right to idolize that woman as a mother !—If you did but know with what warmth of affection I have loved her——”

“ I *do* know it, my dear fellow, and I wish she had been worthier of your love ; but still, if Lord Mornington’s claims are untenable——”

“ They cannot—they shall not be ! Were all the lawyers in the kingdom to pronounce in favour of my keeping possession of Selwood,

I would not remain here a day after the avowals of—of Lady Norman!—”

“After all, I can’t but feel that you are right,” cried Crutt, shrugging his shoulders, after a long pause of deliberation. “I might have guessed that so straightforward, warm-hearted a lad had never a drop of Sir Richard Norman’s blood in his veins,—who was as bitter an aristocrat, and as crooked a contriver, as ever drew breath.—What sort of a chap is this rightful heir you talk of?—Is he likely to act an honest part by you, and feel the value of the sacrifice made in his favour?—”

“Don’t call it a sacrifice!—Reflect how many years he has been kept out of his own!”

“And was the fault yours, pray?—Mightn’t he be kept out of it to all eternity, but for your integrity?—”

“I expect nothing from Lord Mornington,” said Walter, proudly. “The wrong I have done him was unintentional; but I should wilfully degrade myself if I consented to become his pensioner. Thanks to Avesford, I have received a good education.—I have not been

pampered; I have not been bred luxuriously; I have few expensive tastes. As soon as I recover the stunning effects of a blow so unexpected, I shall find courage to exert myself; and (I am vain enough to think) friends to support my courage."

"You have one at your side, my dear Walter," said Cruttenden Maule, much affected, "who loves you not a jot the less for all that is come and gone. You have been bred under my eye as my nephew;—you have *become* my nephew,—and such to the end of time you shall remain. Never fancy that you want a home, Walter,—my house is yours,—my esteem is yours.—Had you continued to occupy your high station, you would have done it honour; but there is none to which you may fall from which you will not rise superior.—Give us your hand, my boy!—I don't express myself, maybe, so well as Avesford would do,—but I don't *feel* the less for my plain speaking.—"

It was long before Walter recovered self-possession to express his sense of all this kindness; but having at length disemburthened his heart

of its heavy load, his next ejaculation was—
“ *Poor Constance !*”

“ Ay,—poor Constance !” reiterated Cruttenden Maule. “ Such pride as she took in her brother !—It will be the breaking of the girl’s heart.—Matty—Matty !—you have much to answer for !”

“ I would give the remainder of my days,” said Walter, deeply sighing, “ to regain but for a single week my past illusions !—If I could only repossess myself of that mother and that sister, Selwood and all the rest would not cost me a pang.”

“ I tell you what,” cried Cruttenden, brightening as with a sudden happy impulse,—“ when all this wretched story is blown over and forgotten, and my sister and niece settled at Halsewell as though they had never belonged to any other place, who knows but you might hit Constance’s fancy, and set my conscience at ease by becoming joint-heirs to the property ?”

A crimson flush rose to the very brow of Walter, only to subside and leave his face of a

ghastly paleness. “There is profanation in the idea!”—faltered he. “Constance is my *sister*—still and ever my sister!—There is profanation in the idea!—”

The morrow came,—and what a morrow;—what strange silence,—what stranger greetings—in the little family!—When they met at breakfast for the sake of avoiding unpleasant inferences in the household, it was plain to all that not one of them had slept. Lady Norman and her daughter were pale and tremulous; but Walter appeared to have nerved himself with high resolve. Not the movement of a muscle betrayed the emotions that were struggling within! When Lady Norman entered the room, she had not courage to direct her eyes towards him. The generous frankness with which he came forward offering her, as usual, his hand, encouraged her to fall upon his neck exclaiming through her tears—“*Can* you forgive me?—Walter—my adopted son!—”

Disembarrassed of its heavy load of dissimulation, and the terrors to which that dissimulation

had given rise, the heart of Matilda seemed restored to all its natural tenderness. "Never had Walter been more dear to her than now, when he stood before her deprived by the frenzy of her remorse of the undue distinctions of fortune. *She* felt that she had injured him by the betrayal of his secret; *he*, that he was injured only by the act through which that secret had originated. Or rather, it was not of *injury* he was conscious;—he felt only unhappy,—only destitute of the ties which, but the preceding day, had rendered him the happiest and proudest of mankind.

Cruttenden had already given up his political dinner:—his thoughts were absorbed by the affliction which had fallen upon Selwood. Walter was anxious to set off immediately for London, to consult with his guardian touching the most becoming mode of communicating to Lord Mornington and his son the extraordinary event that had occurred. But no sooner did he talk of leaving Selwood, than Lady Norman and Constance implored him, almost on their knees, not to let them lose sight of him in his present

state of mind;—and the good-natured uncle instantly offered to be the bearer of letters of explanation to his brother-in-law, and return with Avesford's opinion, if he found it impossible to absent himself from his parliamentary duties for an interview with Matilda and his ward.

No sooner had Maule departed on his friendly errand, than the three who were left behind, found the restraint of each other's presence almost insupportable. So long as Cruttenden was among them, with his abrupt manners, jovial voice, and unceremonious dealing, they had found the discussion of the most delicate questions easier than it *now* appeared to treat of the most indifferent. Neither of them knew in what terms to address the other; neither of them wished to mark, by a sudden transition of manner, too deep a consciousness of what had occurred. All conversation was an effort. They had too much matter for reflection to be disposed even for each other's society; yet a moment after Lady Norman had retired to her room, conscience suggested that Walter might,

perhaps, fancy himself neglected, nay, designedly avoided; and she accordingly returned to impose a further restraint upon his harassed feelings.

It had been insisted upon by Maule that no steps should be taken at Selwood, till he brought down advice from Walter's guardian; and all the preparations for the attainment of the young baronet's majority were accordingly suffered to proceed. Every hour, some person or other waited upon Sir Walter for orders or instructions which it was repugnant to his feelings to issue;—servants, bailiffs, tenants, overseers, labourers, had questions to ask, or favours to solicit. Not a few of the petitioners quitted Selwood Manor with the impression that the young gentleman, of whose urbanity they had heard so much, could be as ungracious as his neighbours; for he listened without affecting to disguise his absence of mind; and instead of granting a satisfactory answer, begged time to consider questions of which it was clear he had taken no pains to understand a syllable.

The heir of Selwood was evidently in a fair way to be spoiled by the pomps of his situation.

No sooner had Walter dismissed his importunate solicitors, than he wandered out into the park, shuddering as a thousand trivial objects renewed the anguish arising from early associations. *There* was the sapling oak surrounded with its fence of honour, of which, guided by his supposed father, his little hands had been made to plant the acorn on his arrival from France, according to the immemorial custom of the heirs of Selwood Manor.—*There* was his old brown pony (Cruttenden Maule's first present to his nephew), shaggy with age, and almost blind, which came neighing to meet him,—so regularly had the kindness of Constance accustomed her brother's pet to be caressed during Walter's absence from England.—*There* was the old avenue which he had thinned and refreshed.—*There* a new road stumped out towards the woodlands, the direction of which Miss Norman herself had suggested—to include the most picturesque points

of the landscape.—*There* were the venerable Gothic almshouses peeping from between the sycamore trees, of which the aged inmates had blessed his birth; and to whom his very aspect was a spectacle of hope and gladness.

And all these were to be abandoned,—all these to be forgotten,—or remembered only as a dream,—a mockery!—Early affections were to be obliterated,—early opinions renounced,—nay, even the lofty principles and patriotic aspirings instilled into the wealthy baronet, must, in future, unbeseem the poor foundling who was to depart, self-exiled, from the gates of the Manor. From the garden of Eden, he was to wander into the great wilderness, bringing forth “thorns and thistles, that in the sweat of his face he was to eat bread.”—The past was to be as nothing. His life was only now beginning;—“Would,” murmured Walter, as he groaned aloud in agony, “*would* that it were now to end!—”

Still, there were consolatory thoughts! During his brief stewardship at the Manor, he had done no cruel or unjust thing; as a member of

society, no ungenerous or unworthy action. Many voices were lifted up to Heaven in blessings upon his charity, or in testimony to his forbearance; there was not a token by which he was aware of having an enemy in the world. How different had been the bitterness of Walter's soul if followed in his banishment by the execrations of the poor!—

“They will sometimes remember me,” he murmured, on attaining an eminence from which, through the leafless trees, the village was discernible;—“remember me with kindness,—perhaps with regret.—I have injured no man,—despoiled no man.—My career, God be thanked, has not been that of the oppressor!—”

As if invoked by the spell of that condoling thought, the spirit of peace stood beside him. Constance, who had followed him at a distance from the house, placed her arm in his, determined to accompany his wanderings. For Lady Norman no longer evinced the smallest jealousy of their being together. The frantic apprehensions which had led to the fatal discovery, were dissipated now that the young

people, forewarned of the ground on which they stood, were on their guard against themselves. All anger seemed to have departed from her nature; like some evil spirit, exorcised and cast forth by a superior power.

They walked on together in silence. While apart, a thousand thoughts had arisen for communication; yet now they were side by side, not a word suggested itself. It was a bright balmy day; the landscape was fresh with vegetation, and varied with sunshine and shade; the woods were budding almost visibly before their eyes; the orchards were frosted with many blossoms; the shubberies alive with the flutter and song of birds. The deer lay huddled under the still leafless oaks, as if fancying that, since the preceding day, leaves must have sprung forth to shelter them from the vivifying April sun; and the slopes were bright with early flowers—gay-suited courtiers of the spring — pressing forward into bloom. All around was brilliant, genial, hopeful—resplendent with promise and prosperity.

At length, Walter ventured some trivial re-

mark on the beauty of the weather, lest his companion should consider him selfishly absorbed in his troubles; while Constance answered cheerfully, dreading that he might fancy her intent on their relative change of situation. It was impossible for them to indulge at present in any natural impulse. Miss Norman was intent only on proving to Walter the undiminished warmth of her affection; Walter, on concealing from *her* the undiminished strength of *his*. After every fresh effort at conversation, they relapsed into deeper silence. Their hearts were full,—too full,—*far* too full for words.

At length, a turn of the road brought in view, through a vista of the woods, the dome of the family mausoleum, containing the remains of Sir Richard Norman. The sun sparkled upon the tall gilt cross crowning the summit of the consecrated abode of death; recalling to the minds of both the reverence with which they had so often, from childhood, repaired, hand in hand, to the spot, unknown to Lady Norman, whose grief they were unwilling to revive by reference to the object of their filial regrets.

Upon their father's grave they had knelt and prayed in secret, uninfluenced by differences of religious faith ; while recommending their father in the earth beneath to the mercy of their Father who was in heaven, and beseeching the love and intercession of him who had watched over their infancy, and who was now, they trusted and believed, a companion of the spirits of just men made perfect.

Unconsciously, they now continued to direct their steps along the mossy path overshadowed with lofty pine trees, towards the mausoleum ; for the solemnity of the place, instead of increasing the reserve of Walter, seemed to encourage him to give utterance to his griefs.

“ That he could have so cherished and loved a being alien to his blood ! ” — were the first words that became intelligible to Miss Norman of the incoherent ejaculations which burst in a subdued voice from his bosom. “ *You*, Constance, who know your father only through my representations,—you who were an infant when he was taken from us,—cannot appreciate this. But I swear to you, that even so tenderly as

you are strained to the bosom of Lady Norman, even so—every night, every morning—was I clasped to that of her husband. I can feel it now, Constance,—the embrace in which he used to enfold me, till sometimes my petulant childhood rebelled against the earnestness of his caresses. I can hear them now,—the benedictions he used to lavish on my head. They were those of a tender, fervent, anxious parent. Unless all earthly affections are a pretext, a falsehood, a derision,—those embraces and those blessings sprang from the impulse of parental love!—*Can* he have so deceived me?—To secure his own purposes, can he have been this habitual dissembler?—Can such cold hypocrisy exist in human nature?—Oh! no, no; I cannot, will not, believe that the father whom my little heart revered and loved, even as it loved and revered the Almighty Being, the origin of our mutual affection,—and sorrowed after for years with such bitter and poignant affliction,—was thus sporting with an infant's love!—”

No answer was to be offered to this outpouring of the soul; and, after some minutes' pause,

Walter resumed aloud the chain of his reflections.

“ Yet it *must* be so !—Lady Norman can have no motive for her avowal. It must be so ! I *must* be a poor deluded outcast—cheated, even at an age whose innocence is usually its defence against deliberate treachery.—Oh, Constance ! in this hour of varied torments, I feel that it would almost console me could I permit myself to restore my confidence to the memory of him whom I cherished as a father. It was such a deep-seated, such a religious love I bore him !—Long as is the period since his death, not a day of all those years have I failed to invoke his name with the pious veneration of a son. I can pardon his having imposed upon the world ; but not his having defrauded my young heart of its warm affections. He should have dealt honestly by his victim. He should have treated the heir of Selwood *as* his heir,—not as his child—nay, not as doating fathers treat an idolized and faultless child. *You*, Constance,—you, the offspring of his marriage,—he never loved or caressed as he did the foundling ! I can understand

now why my moth—— why Lady Norman seemed jealous for her girl, and would follow us with her infant in her arms, as he led me out into the park or through the village, proud of the admiration I excited.—I can understand it all!—But, oh! wherefore deal thus cruelly by the child he was mocking with this empty show of tenderness?—Constance, may you never experience the pang of withdrawing your reverence from a parent!—”

As if aware that the heart of his companion might be already cognizant of such a trial, Walter suddenly checked himself.

“My own undeserving may have merited my present tortures,” cried he, after a vain attempt to keep silence. “Perhaps I was insufficiently grateful for the joy of being the son to such a mother,—the brother of such a sister. Conscious as I was of my happiness, I ought to have given breath to hourly thanks for being allied to such warm hearts—such spirits of love and peace. It is only now I am alone,—alone in the universe,—spurned, despised, condemned,—that I appreciate what it was to be entitled to your

sisterly tenderness !—Of all the griefs and humiliations weighing upon me, my only insupportable disappointment is that of the affections ! But yesterday, a mother, sister, kindred, friends ; *now*, NOTHING !—To feel that in some remote portion of the world, no matter how humble the sphere of society, there were those on whom I held the claim of kinsmanship, would be some alleviation.—But even that comfort is denied me !—In the wilderness, a drop of water is as unattainable as an abounding river !”

“ Time will soften the blow,” faltered Constance, in a low subdued voice ; “ time will enlarge your views, and afford you fresh objects of solicitude. But do not ask me to sympathize in your despondency !—*I* cannot regard you as isolated,—*I* cannot think of you as an outcast, To me, in spite of every proof, you are still my brother !—My heart avows you so,—my heart *proclaims* you so. Nature cannot be thus deceived,—cannot be thus deceitful.—Till you voluntarily throw me off and disown me, Walter, worlds shall not tempt me to call you by any other name !—”

“I accept the pledge,” said he, though not with the elation this generous promise might have been expected to inspire; “but till my soul can extricate itself from its present maze of wonder and consternation, expect me not to be grateful. At present, every softer human feeling is dormant in the bosom of the foundling!—”

CHAPTER IX.

The props
Of love and loving hearts o'erthrown ; what follows
But ruin to the structure of my fortunes ?—
Most lonely am I in this world of care,—
Of all forsaken creatures most abandoned !

MASSINGER.

TRYING were the hours still remaining to be worn through, ere the return of their messenger from town. Yet when, the following evening, a carriage was at length discerned through the dusk slowly ascending the hill towards the Manor, not one of the three persons so deeply interested in the tidings it was to convey, but would have gladly prolonged the suspense against which they had been murmuring !

Lady Norman retreated hastily to her own room ; and though unwilling to expose her

agitation to her daughter, insisted that Constance should bear her company, in order to leave poor Walter free and uncontrolled in the interview that was to decide his destiny.

As he entered the hall to welcome his friend, Walter discerned, unless deceived by the uncertain light, that several persons were alighting from the carriage. From among them his beloved guardian advanced towards him; and hurrying him beyond the observation of the servants, folded him fervently and parentally in his arms.

“I always regarded you as a *friend*, rather than a nephew,” faltered Avesford with great emotion, when he found the heart of the agitated young man beating against his own; “but I am happier than I had a right to expect! —By the strange events that have occurred, Walter, I *have* obtained a *son*!—”

Ere this affectionate greeting could be acknowledged as it deserved, Mrs. Avesford was by their side, eager to administer her share of comfort to the afflictions of her long cherished Walter, both Elizabeth and her husband being

secretly indignant against the authors of the imposition by which his feelings had been so cruelly set at nought.

They pitied Lady Norman ; but their honest hearts could not overlook the habitual duplicity in which she had dwelt among them. They could believe that she must have suffered deeply. They knew that the first step taken in the path of deceit is the cause of a thousand unanticipated deceptions ; as a single untrue line in a mass of building falsifies the whole structure. They even suspected that her harassing anxieties, and the perpetual dread of divine vengeance, had eventually bewildered her mind, and excited her to the frenzies instigating her confession. The long concealment, the final motive of disclosure, were alike offensive in their eyes. But compassion suggested forbearance. Her fault must be tenderly dealt with ; for it was that of the mother of Constance.

“ My dear boy,” said Avesford, when seated beside Walter in the drawing-room, and still affectionately retaining his hand, “ I have heard with the sympathy for which I know you will give me credit, the particulars of this wretched

story ;—and approve all your views,—all your proceedings.—You have acted as a man of honour, Walter ; you have acted as I would wish my ward, *my friend*, to act.—I cannot offer you high lineage or princely fortune in compensation for those you so honourably resign. But I offer you an honest name, and what the world calls opulence.—My wife loves you as I do. Be the child of our adoption,—the comfort of our old age !—My fortune is the fruit of my industry, my family is prosperous in all its branches. There will be none to blame or resent the disposal of my property ; and I have only to bless the goodness of Providence, which supplies to me so worthy a successor, and one so dear to me and mine. Thus far, Walter, for the bright side of your prospects !—Against the gloomy one, my dear boy, all my care,—all my affection,—will not suffice to close your eyes !—Let me, therefore, counsel you to confront with fortitude the contemplation. Let every step and measure be instigated by the best impulses of your soul. You must see clearly, in order that you may decide discreetly.”

Walter replied only by pressing in silence the

hand of the friend thus nobly careful of his interests.

“Do not suppose,” resumed Avesford in the same low persuasive tone, “that I wish to undervalue the greatness of your trial, or of the sacrifices you are called on to make. But I would not have you invest them with undue consequence. A man, Walter, is the son of his actions;—not of his position in life.—You are still on the threshold of your career. On yourself alone depends the honour or shame of your destinies. Denied the more endearing ties of life, you will also be exempt from their claims upon your time and tenderness. Henceforward, therefore, be your country’s, my dear Walter, heart and soul your country’s, till by your exertions you have earned a title to leisure and distinction. As the pampered owner of Selwood Manor, such virtue had been difficult,—perhaps impossible. Your misfortunes, therefore, may become a source of merit, and of distinction, far more flattering than the utmost glories conveyed by descent; and I feel that, as the ardent labourer in an honourable cause, you will

stand higher than as the heir of a line whose founders fought at Crecy or Poitiers."

"Your words afford me encouragement," replied Norman, vainly attempting to assume a more cheerful tone. "I shall some day be grateful to you for giving me hope. At present, I am writhing under the stings of memory."

"Let me now inquire," pursued Avesford, perceiving that his wife and her brother had quitted the room to go in search of their afflicted sister; "whether you have experienced further harshness from Lady Norman since her cruel revelation of the secret originating in her disingenuousness.

"None!—Neither in that occurrence or any other, do I find grounds of complaint; during the last two days, her kindness to me has been that of a mother."

Avesford bit his lip impatiently, scarcely able to repress the dissatisfaction gathering in his heart against Matilda.

"I need not ask," he resumed, "whether, till this disastrous epoch, any hint had transpired

to excite your suspicions of the peculiarities of your situation. With your frank disposition, Walter, I feel that you would not have concealed them a single hour from *me*, your friend and guardian. But I am anxious to know whether, during the last three days, any further disclosures have been made?—”

“ No allusion to the subject has passed Lady Norman’s lips. Humbled and repentant, her only object appears to be a reparation for the pain she has inflicted.”

“ So far, well.—I have comfort, then, in store for you. A packet is in my custody, Walter, addressed to you by your late father.”

“ *My father!*” — mournfully interrupted Walter.

“ *By the late Sir Richard Norman,*” said Avesford, correcting himself, “ which may throw some light upon this miserable subject. By his desire, it was to have been given to your hands on the day of attaining your majority. But as it is necessary that a general exposure should take place previous to that event, I conceive that I am acting up to the spirit of my instruc-

tions by forestalling by a few days the stated period. I have only one condition to make, my dear Walter ;—that, regarding me as a second father, you permit me to be present during your perusal of the letter.”

“ You are afraid to entrust me to myself at so trying a moment,” said Walter, gravely. “ But fear nothing.—After all I *have* borne, I have courage for the rest.—What more,—what *worse* can betide me ?—And yet,” continued he, when Avesford, after having rung for lights, proceeded to place a heavy packet in his hands, “ I own I tremble ! At present, I know my birth to be obscure—mysterious.—I *may* have to learn that it is the result of shame, of guilt ! Avesford, pity me—give me your hand—give me courage. I *may* have to learn that I have living parents, and that they are such as to disgrace me !—”

“ Read—read !” said his compassionate friend ; and having brought candles from the distant table, on which at his command they had been placed by the servants,—and disposed them so that the full light fell upon the sofa on which

Walter had thrown himself, he withdrew to the fireplace. Ere, however, Avesford detached his eyes from his ward, he perceived that Walter's face was deathly pale,—that he looked heart-sick—exhausted. For a moment, he repented having been so precipitate in the delivery of the packet. He saw that Walter had scarcely courage to break the seal, that his hands trembled—that he was labouring for breath and self-command.

Unwilling to prove a restraint upon Walter's feelings, he contemplated the young man's hesitation as the whole scene stood reflected before him in a large mirror over the chimney-piece against which he was leaning; and though the affectionate guardian longed to be by Walter's side, breathing words of encouragement, he had courage to stand aloof, and leave nature to her struggles, and his *protégé* to the sustainment of that strength which is from above.

He was not prepared, however, for the sudden change which soon developed itself in Walter's countenance and deportment. Within the exterior envelope, the contents inscribed in

which appeared to excite little emotion, were two letters, one of which he proceeded with eager haste to peruse. At the conclusion of the first half dozen lines, a sob, a gasp, escaped the bosom of Walter ; and ere Avesford could reach him, he had fallen back on the sofa, overpowered by a burst of hysteric tears such as rarely affords assuagement to the sufferings of his age or sex. Walter wept like a child,—like a woman,—as he passionately and incoherently exclaimed, “ I am content—I am happy !—Rank and fortune are gone ; but the best treasures of affection are left.—No longer *Sir* Walter Norman—no longer master of Selwood ;—but still, still and ever, the brother of Constance !—Where is she—let me go to my sister—let me enfold her once more in my arms !”

Avesford, who feared that the young man’s senses were bewildered, mildly, but resolutely detained him.

“ I must not have you alarm her by the sight of all this distraction,” said he. “ Compose yourself.”

“ Compose myself ! when, after the tortures

of the last three days, I find the worst of my apprehensions groundless," cried Walter. "Oh, Avesford, Avesford!—if you knew what it has been to me to feel that an eternal gulf had arisen between me and the beloved companion of my childhood!—*my sister*!—and how proud and joyous I am in pronouncing that word,—that name,—that soothing, tender name!—But perhaps," cried he, suddenly checking himself, "Lady Norman's pride may again interfere to deprive me of this consolation!—She may not permit her daughter to distinguish with sisterly regard the illegitimate son of her husband!—"

This expression removed a load of anxiety from the mind of Avesford, by affording a key to all Walter's inconsistencies.

"Lady Norman will scarcely refuse her countenance to the adopted child of her sister and brother," replied he. "But does it appear, then, by Sir Richard's letters, that she whom we have all been taxing with duplicity, was herself a dupe?—"

"My mind is still so bewildered," cried Wal-

ter, pressing his hand to his forehead, "that I am scarcely able to develop such a tissue of mysteries. Read, my dear Avesford. You will be better able than myself to see through the intricacies of the case."

And having thrust the envelope and its contents into the hands of his companion, Walter leaned back, screening his face from observation, as if to collect his thoughts or conceal his emotions.

The moments hurried by unnoticed. The agitation of his feelings left him no leisure for impatience; for it seemed to rouse him from a profound reverie, when, after a deliberate perusal of a letter of many pages closely written, Avesford returned it to his hand, observing—"I congratulate you, Walter! In all this, there is much to afflict,—nothing to impart a permanent stigma,—nothing to inspire you with any harsher feeling towards the authors of your days, than compassion for the frailties of human nature. Your father seems to have endured in his latter days such bitterness of remorse as disarms the severity with which we might other-

wise feel inclined to consider so great a fault. Cut off in the prime of his career, it is probable that, had Sir Richard outlived the evil influence exercised over him, he might have made atonement and restitution. The delinquent was evidently haunted by dread of exposure. He knew the weakness of his wife. He knew that one who had been wrought upon to abet his errors, might be wrought upon to reveal them. Mark the tenour of the appeal addressed to you in the enclosure:—‘I entrust this letter to the honour of my beloved son, to be opened in the event of legal rights being established to invalidate his claim as heir to my title and estates. But in case no such claims should be preferred, I require him to preserve it inviolate during his life, and to take steps for its destruction unopened at his decease.’ It is not *our* fault, Walter, that these injunctions have been disobeyed. Lady Norman’s revelations rendered it necessary to refer to what I trusted would prove to be testamentary dispositions;—and though, alas! these letters serve only to confirm the truth of her assertions, they have at

least satisfied the cravings of your affectionate heart, and proved that in all he adventured here and hereafter to advance your interests in life, Sir Richard was actuated less by an unjustifiably vindictive feeling towards his heirs, than by tenderness for the innocent offspring of his illicit love.”

Walter Norman seemed to shrink from this reference to the shame of his origin ; but Avesford mildly continued—

“ It is possible, my dear Walter, that your unhappy mother may still survive ; and though you have no right to endanger her peace of mind and reputation by a betrayal of the errors of her youth, this second letter, bearing her address, points out your father’s desire that you should approach her. On this point, Walter, comfort may be in store for you.”

The young man shook his head.

“ You, least of all the world, are entitled to judge her harshly. When you have fully perused Sir Richard Norman’s appeal to your feelings, you will also be the least inclined. Meanwhile, I have one counsel to bestow. Con-

secrete your father's avowals to the holiest secrecy. Suffice it to the world that you renounce the inheritance of Selwood. Even Lady Norman must not be too largely trusted. Your sister's youth and Matilda's delicate position render it needless that they should know more than I undertake to disclose to them,—that you are the son, though not the heir, of Sir Richard Norman of Selwood Manor.”

“Go to Constance, then,—go to my friends,—and set their minds at ease, by explaining the happy aspect my affairs have taken,” said Walter, pressing his hands to his throbbing brows; while Avesford, though his heart thrilled at the young man's generosity in applying such an epithet to a circumstance which, though it entitled him to the sisterly love of Constance, rendered him a beggar and an outcast, could not forbear to notice that Walter had already begun to generalize Lady Norman among his “friends.”

Instinct seemed to forewarn him that, while the discovery of his origin entitled him to the affection of Miss Norman, it was to create an

enemy in her mother. In Matilda's now embittered frame of mind, it was not likely she should regard with indulgence, far less with tenderness, the offspring of one whose rivalry had embittered her youth, and estranged from her idolized child the fondness of its father.

Perplexed as she had been of old by the mysteries enveloping the proceedings of Sir Richard, Matilda was now fated to a more tormenting renewal of her misgivings. Avesford hastened to announce in general terms to the family that Sir Richard Norman, after avowing Walter Norman to be his son, added a codicil to his will, entitling him, in the event of the discovery of his illegitimacy, to a moiety of his disposable property which had been hitherto assigned as the portion of his daughter; and while Constance, bathed in tears of joy, flew to the arms of her brother, Lady Norman pursued her agitated interrogations. She insisted upon knowing the name of Walter's mother. "For *whom* had she and her child been sacrificed?"

"Be content, my dear sister!"—was Avesford's stern reply. "Let the secrets of the

dead rest with them in the grave. Walter's feelings and Sir Richard Norman's instructions on this delicate topic are to be respected. Henceforward, *I* exercise over him the authority of a father; and my first mandate forbids him to reveal more than is already known of his unhappy birth. My wife and her family will, I know, coincide in my wishes."

Lady Norman stood too much in awe of the honest man whose good opinion she feared she had already forfeited, to press the question in opposition to his will.

"God knows the poor fellow shall never be mortified by *my* curiosity!"—was Cruttenden Maule's cordial reply to the appeal of his brother-in-law; "for all that has come to light, I don't love him and sha'n't love him a jot the less than when I thought him my nephew. I never had a slighting word or look from Walter, when he was a great gentleman; he shall never have one from *me* now he's a beggar."

"Softly, softly, my dear Maule!" interposed Avesford, with a smile. "Fern Hill is not Selwood Manor; yet the time may

come for Walter Avesford to occupy a more eminent position in society than Sir Walter Norman."

The jealous heart of Lady Norman experienced a new pang at this startling announcement. The alien introduced by her weakness into the bosom of her family, then, was to be detained and cherished there to the detriment of her own daughter!—Constance, so beloved at Fern Hill, was to be superseded in the affection of the Avesfords by the illegitimate offspring of her husband!—

Conscious that it became her to evince as strong an interest in behalf of the unfortunate Walter as the rest of her family, she dreaded his entrance into the room, when she must rise and embrace him. Within the last hour, he had become hateful to her. She longed to look upon his face as though his lineaments were still unknown to her, hoping to decypher there the fatal secret, and detect a resemblance, *not* to the faithless husband of her youth, but to the woman who had replaced her in Sir Richard's affections. But while she longed, she

loathed!—It was impossible not to transfer to this living evidence of her wrongs the resentment she was no longer able to expend on him whom she had so gratuitously loved,—on him who had so gratuitously injured and abandoned her.

Walter appeared, at length, with Constance on his arm,—the faces of both irradiated with joy; and, at that moment, he so singularly resembled Sir Richard Norman in the happier period of his career, that Matilda shuddered, as if again in his presence, at the recollection of her broken promise, and the approaching disgrace of his son.

No one, however, would have inferred from the young man's deportment that he was on the eve of a step precipitating him from the summit of prosperity. While Constance continued to whisper, as if never weary of the name,—“my brother,—my dear brother,”—he scorned to afflict himself with painful reminiscences. Instead of calling to mind that the hours of his pride were numbered,—that he was spending

his last evening at Selwood Manor, he chose to dwell only upon the alleviations of his lot.

“Do not pity me, dearest,” was his reply to the sorrowful glances directed towards him by Miss Norman. “Consider how much cause I have to be grateful. Reflect what were my feelings yesterday, and from what depths of misery I have been redeemed. To have found a sister,—a father,—when I believed myself condemned to resign for ever the sweetest affections of life, makes me regard myself as more than ever a favourite of fortune.”

Nor did his courage fail him when active measures were to be taken. The dignity and firmness of Walter’s deportment were as remarkable as the silly wonderment of the Mornington family at finding themselves invited to take possession of the Selwood property. For some time, they treated Sir Walter Norman’s letter of explanation as a hoax upon their credulity. But it was too gravely worded for them to persist in the idea; and there needed little logic and less evidence to secure their ultimate

conviction of the truth of his declarations. All they had so long suspected it was now easy to believe.

Nevertheless, Lord Mornington and his son were sensibly touched by the spirit and integrity of Walter's conduct. His views were not those of the world in which they had their being; and as generosity is a quality that often begets generosity in return, they felt piqued by his disinterestedness to make some display of magnanimity. After ascertaining that he was to take the name and succeed to the property of his opulent guardian, they hazarded vast professions of cousinly regard and loud threats of pecuniary munificence; and encouraged by these friendly demonstrations, Walter entreated that they would limit their kindness to allowing his secession from his honours to pass in silence. No public explanation of his change of circumstances was requisite. The superior rank of Lord Mornington dispensed on *his* part with any change of title to arrest the attention of society; and when, at length it became clear to the neighbourhood and tenantry that there

existed a flaw invalidating Walter's claim to the Selwood estates, they settled it among themselves that the misfortune originated in some informality connected with the protestant Lady Norman's alliance with a catholic spouse. This view of the case having been confidently announced by the county paper, was duly copied into all the London journals, to be transferred at the close of the year into the "Annual Register," and become matter of history ; and Matilda, bound to silence by a sense of honour and remorse, as the Morningtons by a sense of gratitude, had the mortification to find that with the majority, Walter—the child of her rival, the blight of her existence,—was henceforward to pass as her own illegitimate offspring !

In process of time, the editor of the "County Chronicle," in order to vary his inventions and keep up the interest of the public, judiciously added,—“ We learn, with sincere satisfaction, that, in consideration of the legal oversights to which his amiable and talented nephew has fallen a victim, that distinguished gentleman and upright patriot,—the honourable member

for Liverpool, has entailed upon the only son of the late Sir Richard Norman the whole of his princely estates in Lancashire, Cumberland, and Westmoreland. By the king's letters patent, Walter Norman N——n, Esq., heretofore called Sir W—lt—r N——n, is, consequently, to assume the name of A——d. Mr. Walter N—rm—n A—sf—d is at present residing with his uncle at his beautiful mansion at Fern Hill."

"Let them talk and let them write, my dear boy!" was Avesford's reply to Walter's remonstrances against leaving these assertions uncontradicted. "To whom do we owe explanations on the subject?—I and all my family are content to leave the world to its silly conceits. Society may swallow a newspaper invention, more or less, without choaking;—those who pin their faith on such authorities deserve to be taken in. I trust you will soon give these people something better to talk and write about than your birth, parentage, or education. From any young man but yourself, Walter, I should have insisted upon proofs of will and power to work

out his own independence ere I secured to him the reversion of my property ; but it were unreasonable to exact such exertions from *you* who were not reared with the view to professional distinctions ; and as to stimulating them by holding out pecuniary temptations, I know you well enough, my dear Walter, to feel sure that the semblance of a bribe would disgust you with your opening career. All I ask of you, therefore, is, to strengthen your understanding by the study of men and books ; that when called upon to devote your services to your country, you may not be found wanting. It is not only at Fern Hill, but, as the friend of the people, and the servant of the public, you must learn to supply the place of one who holds it a sin against the Creator to allow those faculties to rust in inactivity which are given us for the advantage of the community.”

Avesford shook his head with a good-humoured smile, on noticing with how vague a look of abstraction these exhortations were received. “ At present, poor fellow, it is labour lost to preach to him,” was the good man’s wise con-

clusion. “ Such a shock as he has received is not to be overcome in a day. His mind is elsewhere,—his heart is elsewhere. We must leave time for his emotions to subside. A visit to the continent to work out his destinies and set the instincts of that affectionate heart at rest; and then, let him fairly start in his new career of life !”

CHAPTER X.

Thy place is fill'd—thy sceptre wrung from thee.
No bending knee will call thee Cæsar now ;
No humble suitors press to speak for right ;
No—not a man comes for redress of thee,
For how canst thou help them and not thyself.

SHAKSPEARE.

FOUR months had elapsed from the period of these startling vicissitudes :—the harvest, whose green and tender blades scarcely clothed the ground at the epoch of the Normans' abandonment of Selwood Manor, being ripe and heavy for the sickle. Walter had reluctantly submitted, during the interim, to the advice of his adopted family that he should remain in England till

deeds of mutual release were signed between himself and the Morningtons; and Constance and her mother happily settled at Halsewell.

No sooner, however, were his affairs finally adjusted, than he took his departure for the continent,—*alone*, absolutely alone. The faithful domestic many years attached to his service, being a native of Selwood, was considered by Walter at present an unsafe companion, and left at Fern Hill till his return. Yet though thus lonely, his spirits were less than usually depressed. He was excited by the consciousness of manifold duties to be fulfilled. His first object was to address to the Avesfords an outpouring of the feelings which had for months struggled undivulged in his bosom. In England his heart had been so wounded, his soul so perplexed, that he found himself unmanned by emotion whenever he attempted to give utterance to his gratitude for the more than fatherly protection accorded to him by his guardian,—the more than motherly affection testified towards him by Bessy, who, remembering with

gratitude the kindness shewn by Walter towards her poor infirm Charles, felt that she could not repay him by too dear a sympathy in his misfortunes.

Of all this, Walter was now able to express his consciousness. He could write, though he could not speak; and his full heart hung over the letters he dispatched to Avesford and his wife, with an excess of tender weakness only to be imagined by those who have been snatched out of the depths of misery by the tender mercies of a friend.

To Avesford, however, his letter contained somewhat more than these acknowledgments. Walter had so long accustomed himself to submit, not to the *authority*, but the *counsels* of his enlightened guardian, that, as yet, he had never summoned courage to resist Avesford's recent disposal of his destinies. Disappointment, however, had matured his reason, till on some points he was clearer-sighted than the disinterested friend intent only upon securing his happiness.

“ Do not think me ungrateful for the noble intentions you have announced towards me,” wrote he, “ when I entreat that you will permit me to work out my fortunes in some professional career. It is not for me, my dear Avesford, to eat the bread of idleness. The line of employment likely to be most acceptable to *you*, and profitable to myself, is, I fear, the law; but my inclinations point otherwise. Forgive me, but I have not yet fortitude for England!—The knowledge of foreign languages acquired during my long sojourn on the continent will probably avail me in a diplomatic career; and I hope to obtain an appointment as attaché. Any mission, from one end of Europe to another, would meet my views;—God knows I have no predilections to guide my choice. Only give me an occupation to save me from myself!—Only let me prove that my industry may be relied on; in order that Constance and her mother, on seeing me in the road to independence, may be persuaded to accept back that moiety of Sir Richard Norman’s

personal property which, but for me, would have been the undivided portion of his daughter.

“ *Your* interest, my dear Avesford, would readily obtain this favour from government. But as you have never shackled your political independence by the smallest obligation, I appeal to you whether you may not prefer my obtaining the appointment by means of some personal friend. My intimacy with the son of the Duke of ———, leaves me no apprehension of being refused.

“ Thus far as a matter of inclination. But even as a matter of prudence, I have strong arguments in favour of my project. In spite of the sage and magisterial airs I have sometimes seen him assume, my guardian has not yet entered his eight-and-fortieth year; and should some unforeseen misfortune deprive him of the beloved companion so dear to us all, a second marriage might render him the father of children whom even his partiality would bitterly repent having disinherited in favour of a stranger.

“ Suffer me, therefore, I entreat, to reverse the

common order of things, and dictate to my benefactor the mode and measure of his bounties. During your lifetime, grant me such assistance as, after my act of restitution to Constance, will maintain me till my official services are repaid by the means of self-support. Lacking nearer and dearer heirs, your intentions in my favour may eventually be fulfilled. Meanwhile (and long be the interim prolonged), leave me your esteem, and permission to labour for my independence!—”

This letter once despatched, Walter felt in some degree relieved from his burthen of cares; and at liberty to resign himself to the influence of the fixed idea which was beginning to form the at once torment and consolation of his existence,—*his mother!*—There were moments, indeed, when prolonged contemplation of the subject disturbed his young mind almost to madness. For Walter was still endowed with the holy illusions, the generous candour of youth. He had still an honest trust in the perfectibility of human nature; still that warm

aspiration after the good and true which, whatever may be the turpitude of original sin, proves that the corruptions of the world beget sinfulness of far deeper dye. He had not yet tamed down his standard of excellence to the dwarfed and diminutive scale which the experiences of society force upon our adoption; nor been compelled by circumstances to offer his devotion to shrines, whose idols he knew to have been profaned. Excellence was the object of his fervent worship. He believed in virtuous women and honest men; nor could he at present figure to himself a being convicted of humiliating frailties whom it was possible to love and to honour.

Yet such must be his mother!—a fallen woman,—a faithless wife,—an unnatural parent,—who had surrendered the offspring of her guilt to be reared for a fraudulent purpose in a foreign country, without deigning a second time to cast her eyes upon it!—He had dwelt among pure and high-principled women. Lady Norman and her sister were chaste in word, look, and

thought, almost to coldness ; and these, with his gentle sister, formed his types of womanly excellence. But from these he was now to withdraw his veneration, to bestow it on all that was most faulty,—most degraded.

Sometimes, however,—sometimes, after weary and oppressive meditations upon the isolation of his existence,—he found himself gradually yearning after this unknown and absent mother ;—the woman in whose veins his blood was flowing,—the woman in whose eyes he fancied he should decipher all the mysteries of his destiny,—the woman from whose lips he was to wring words of endearment—words of welcome. Then came the counter apprehension that the blessing he sighed for might prove a curse !—that he might be abjured and rejected !—He might have to work his way to the heart of his mother through the cuirass of worldly prejudices and predilections. She might, perhaps, occupy a position, from which to descend for the recognition of her son, were ruin and infamy !—

But in order fully to develop the perplexity

of his feelings, it becomes necessary to unfold the secret revealed in the testamentary letter of Sir Richard Norman. The packet addressed to Walter to be opened on the attainment of his majority (in the event of a claim having been preferred to the heirship of Selwood), was dated from the Manor House in the year 1819, and conceived in the following terms :—

“ Should circumstances eventually require this letter to be placed before my son, it will reach his hands at a moment when disappointment and mortification have excited to the utmost his resentment against that unknown father, destined, perhaps, to fall into the grave ere his boy is enabled to form a correct judgment of his character, or measure the strength of his affections.

“ For you *are* my son, Walter ;—my son in kin and tenderness,—though not, alas ! in legitimate heirship. Your mother is of honourable birth,—your father of honourable descent ; yet the laws of the land deny you ancestry—deny you a so-

cial position—deny you all but such honours as may be conquered by your own exertions ;—for, you are not the offspring of lawful wedlock !—

“ Forgive me, Walter ! Your father calls upon you from the grave which has long concealed his frailties and his repentance, for pardon and for pity.—Judge me not too severely.—

“ A man born to the worldly advantages I inherited is esteemed an object of envy by the multitude. Examine such destinies, my son, and in most cases you will find them invalidated by some drawback or incompetency, qualifying the magnitude of the blessing. Human life would otherwise be chequered by too cruel an inequality of condition ; and the fate of the poor who do lack and suffer hunger, convey too bitter an accusation against the justice of Providence. The evil influences which surround the cradle of the rich, often counterbalance the blessings of prosperity.

“ My boyhood, Walter, was perplexed between the adulation of menials and preceptors, and the caustic jeers of a narrow-minded guardian. An object of rapacity to the former, of jealousy

to the latter; there was an ulterior purpose in every measure of which I was the object,—in every word addressed to me.—Giles Norman desired only to reduce me to submission,—my dependants to purchase my favour by raising me to undue consequence; and between the wounds inflicted upon my pride by the one, and the unguents applied for my solace by the rest, a gangrene was engendered to poison my future existence.—I became a reckless egotist!—

“ My marriage had its origin in a feeling of revenge. I will not avouch that a fair face had not its momentary influence in promoting the alliance; but its discrepancies were overlooked in the hope of thwarting and disappointing the man—*the heir*—who through life had been the object of my abhorrence.

“ In my turn, I was destined to disappointment. No son came to bless my marriage-bed. Giles Norman and his detested tribe were still triumphant. I, who had been flattered by my domestics and the priest who conciliated my fa-

vour that he might devote it to the catholic cause,—I, the pampered, adulated Sir Richard Norman,—was denied a blessing vouchsafed to the poorest cottager on my estate ! It was but one of the common crossings and disappointments of life. Yet I resented it as an injury,—an injustice of Providence,—a mockery of my hopes and happiness.—

“ There was but one person on whom I could wreak the moroseness of my temper ;—I became a tyrant to my wife ! At that period, dearest Walter, I almost detested Matilda. Her very meekness was an offence. I could not perceive that she resented with bitterness worthy the occasion the disappointment of my expectations ; and it moved my indignation to see her serene, smiling, happy, at moments when I was smarting under some covert insult offered by the hateful Normans !—I had overlooked the difference of station and religious faith existing between us ; yet, instead of securing by these sacrifices a sympathizing, subservient companion, I had obtained only a smiling, affable wife,

content to sail in the sunshine of my lot, but careful to avoid the depths and rocks diversifying its safety and smoothness.

“ I now discovered how little the unaccomplished mind and vapid conversation of Lady Norman were calculated to adorn and sweeten domestic life. I, whose neglected education afforded small grounds of pretension, began to regard with contempt the limited faculties of my wife. I fancied myself entitled to higher companionship. The calm submissiveness which ought to have assuaged my petulance, served only to render me more overbearing.

“ Such was my state of mind, Walter, when the unexpected opening of the continent enabled me to visit Paris. The Abbé, having motives for desiring to appear before his foreign superiors accompanied by his wealthy and influential pupil, strenuously invited me to share his journey. The project was unopposed by Matilda ; and, eager to escape from my embittered home, and the tauntings of her vulgar relations, I hastened to France.

“ You, my son, who, I trust, will have become familiar from an early age with the diversity of foreign life can scarcely appreciate the sensations of one translated for the first time from a life so cold and monotonous as mine, to the brilliant scene of Paris, enlivened by the presence of the allied armies, and cheered by the unexpected restoration of peace. It was a moment of general joy,—universal hilarity ;—and new life seemed to enter into my soul. Spring was in its prime ; and every heart seemed to beat in unison with the season. Never had I been so elated,—never so reckless. No sacrifice was to be spared that conduced to the delight of an epoch never again to recur in the weary waste of my existence.

“ The Abbé was not an unobservant spectator of my enthrallment in the intoxicating pleasures of the hour. Absorbed in vulgar pleasures, I soon announced my intention of spending the allotted period of my absence at Paris ; and this did not suit the professional projects of the old man, who recoiled from no artifice or

astuciousness that tended to further the interests of his church. It was necessary to his plans that the rich English Catholic should accompany him to the presence of the sovereign pontiff; and to Italy he was accordingly determined that I should proceed.

“Had Father O'Donnel exercised over my mind the authority with which my position as his disciple ought to have invested him, he would have appealed to me as my tutor, as my director, to fulfil his object. But his office had never been worthily exercised. Throughout the intercourse between us, it was *my* will that had commanded, *his* wisdom that had obeyed; and on the present occasion, as on all others, he had recourse to stratagem to procure what ought to have been obtained by argument.

“‘I have satisfaction in store for you!’ said he, with a gracious smile one evening when, on returning from a riotous dinner party to dress for a ministerial ball, I found him seated quietly in our old-fashioned hôtel in the Rue de Grenelle. ‘I have to present to your acquaintance, my

dear Sir Richard, two ladies almost as virulent as yourself against the family at Grove Park.'

" ' Two English-women ?—I am sick of them !' cried I ; ' their ceremonious insensibility, at all times wearisome, is not to be tolerated in contrast with the graceful vivacity of the Parisians.'

" ' My ladies are neither ceremonious, insensible, nor English,' replied the Abbé ; ' though one of them, I admit, bears the ill-omened name of Norman.'

" ' Worse and worse !' cried I. ' Let me hear no more of them ; for I am in haste to dress for the Duke of Wellington's ball.'

" ' Dress as quickly as you please,—the quicker the better ; for I have promised that you shall accompany me for half an hour to the Comtesse de L——'s on your way to the Faubourg St. Honoré.'

" ' The Comtesse de L——'s !'—I exclaimed, startled by the mention of a name connected with all the glories of Napoleon's camp, all the splendours of his court.—' I thought

you announced just now a Mrs. or Miss Norman ?”—

“ ‘What’s in a name?’ cried the old man, jocosely, overjoyed to perceive that he had succeeded in captivating my attention. ‘Put on all your attractions for a presentation to two of the loveliest women in existence, and—*en route !*’—

“ Half an hour afterwards, we stepped together into my carriage; and were conveyed to a handsome hôtel in the Faubourg du Roule, which I had already noticed for its noble gardens skirting the Champs Elysées; and after being ushered up a magnificent staircase past the grand apartments of the rez de chaussée, were introduced into a suite of rooms on the second floor, the atmosphere of which announced it to be the abode of luxury and beauty. Elegance predominated in the choice of every object that met the eye. Rare flowers were scattered in several of the richlyfurnished rooms through which we were ushered. But the small octagon chamber, decorated with delicate arabesques, which terminated the suite, con-

tained only commodious seats; and scarcely had we entered, when I was compelled to desist from my observations on finding myself presented by the Abbé to a young and beautiful woman who closely followed us into the room; leaving the *battans* open into an adjoining saloon, more dimly lighted than the boudoir.

“ ‘ For the first time, my dear Norman, I have the pleasure to see you disposed in favour of a relation,’ said the Abbé; ‘ Madame Norman is just returned from England; after an unsatisfactory pilgrimage from Trieste to Grove Park, whose inmates she remembers with an aversion almost equal to your own.’

“ The mystery was thus developed. The lovely stranger before me was the Italian wife of my cousin Rupert; and the motive of her journeying to England was speedily explained.

“ The daughter of an opulent nobleman of Idria, engaged in commercial speculations, Madame N. had visited Vienna with her family, at the period of Napoleon’s occupation of the

city; when old Marcodani, in attempting to conciliate the Emperor's favour for his mercantile projects, had been partly drawn in, partly compelled, to bestow upon one of the low-born generals of the Corsican adventurer the hand and fortune of his younger daughter. At the period of the marriage, Benedetta Marcodani was scarcely fifteen,—timid, affectionate, delicate,—a fragile flower, likely to be crushed by the iron hand of the uneducated man to whom she was thus roughly assigned. Her reluctance was unconcealable and unconcealed. But the tears of whining girls were received by the Emperor with as little concern as the resistance of some petty prince of the empire. The remonstrances of old Marcodani were dismissed with a pinch of snuff. The trembling bride appeared the following day at the high altar of St. Stephen's, escorted by the notabilities of the imperial court. Monsieur le Général Comte de L——, Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour, was enriched;—and Benedetta became a wretch for life !

“ Such was Madame Norman’s brief sketch of her sister’s history.

“ ‘ She was my nursling,’ said she, — tears falling from her dark eyes as she proceeded in her narration. ‘ We were motherless, and *I* had been unto her as a mother ;—had trained her warm heart and noble mind to aspire after happier destinies. Judge, therefore, what it was to me, to behold the gentle girl, whom I had taught to revere the decencies of a quiet domestic home as comprising the true happiness of her sex, flung into the arms of a man who, without an idea beyond his brigade and his cigar, regarded his wife as one among the gilded toys lavished upon him by the Emperor, as a reward for his services ; and to be devoted in return as an ornament to his court, or an enhancement to the amusements of the imperial circle, whenever her smiles were put in requisition !—I discerned this with clearer perception than poor Benedetta.—All *she* felt was repugnance for the coarse, uneducated man, who noted her tears with an oath ; and instead of

listening to my entreaties that the young Countess might, for the present, remain with her family at Trieste, sent her off, under the escort of one of the Emperor's chamberlains who was conveying despatches to Paris, to await his return at the close of the campaign.'—

“Madame Norman described, with so much feeling, so much energy, the affliction of the young girl thus prematurely banished from her home and country, that it was impossible not to sympathize in her emotion. She alluded also, with deep feeling, to her almost motherly terrors, in knowing her unprotected sister to be exposed to the temptations of a luxurious and licentious court.

“‘On this point, however,’ she continued, ‘I was re-assured, by the notorious impetuosity of the General. The violence of character which alarmed me for Benedetta's personal comfort, re-assured me for her honour. The Comte de L—— was not a man to be trifled with! The Comte de L—— was not a man whose wife could be approached with levity. Among the

dangers and difficulties besetting a young girl of sixteen, compelled to play an ostensible part in the most brilliant of European courts, *this* peril was spared !—

“ ‘ Benedetta, meanwhile, was installed in this splendid hotel ; where all the gifts, all the pleasures which opulence could bestow, courted her enjoyment. The Count treated her as a child, to be conciliated with toys and sweetmeats ; and in conformance with Napoleon’s desire that the wives of his generals should enhance, by their style of living and appearance, the magnificence of the imperial court, the young and lovely Countess was distinguished by the richness of her jewels,—her equipage,—her entertainments. Still, though Benedetta’s letters contained no murmurs against her destiny, I could discern that the child was unhappy. Affection, at *her* age the brightest jewel, the most perfect gift,—was wanting !—She was alone in her splendid palace ;—lonely in heart and soul,—a companionless and miserable exile.—

“ ‘ Fortunately, her appointment as lady of the bedchamber to the new Empress almost her

country-woman, soon supplied an occupation for her leisure. For the Count, occupying a high command, was now with the army in Spain. Napoleon's confidence in his high military capacities compelled him to remain absent from Paris; nor was he known to express dissatisfaction at being thus banished from the home which an ill-assorted marriage had stripped of its attractions. How was a man of his age and pursuits to converse with a child like Benedetta?—a child trembling at the sound of his rough words, and the sight of his forbidding countenance!—You may treat it as a jest,' continued Madame Norman, perceiving that a smile overspread my own,—‘but the Comte de L—— was, perhaps, the only man in Paris who looked with perfect unconcern, — perfect indifference, — upon the lovely countenance and beautiful form of my sweet sister.

“ ‘ Had it been otherwise, Benedetta's affections would have been gradually attached by the devotion of a heart even so rude as that of her husband. My sister is an enthusiast. His

military honours were not without value in her eyes. She took pride in his distinctions, and would have taken pleasure in his love. But it was not to be!—The Comte de L—— treated her, at best, with the lofty indulgence of a superior,—never with the tenderness of a husband.

“ ‘ In time, therefore, her awe became dislike. The Countess’s consolation lay in his absence. Monsieur le Comte in Spain, and Madame la Comtesse in Paris,—(here, in this simple, comfortable apartment, surrounded by her books, her music, her faithful attendants,)—comprehended *her* notions of matrimonial happiness. Attached to her duties, pure in word and deed, there was no fear that the repugnance she had vainly attempted to surmount should lead to those unhappy results too frequently attendant on a *mariage forcé* !

“ ‘ Thus was my dear sister situated,’ continued Madame Norman, encouraged by my unaffected interest in her narration, ‘ when the sudden downfall of Napoleon caused what was termed the ruin of her fortunes. The general, faithful to the falling cause, was dismissed at

once from his high command; and, had he been inclined, might have returned at once to Paris. On pretext, however, of precarious health, he chose to remain in the south; and having issued his commands to his wife to remain in the capital, it was clear that he absented himself from home either from contempt of the woman to whom he had been united by his despotic master, or because engaged in political projects which rendered the ties of domestic life at once importunate and dangerous.

“ ‘At this juncture, my sister summoned me to her assistance. Eager to be clasped once more to the bosom of her second mother, Benedetta, on the entrance of the allies into Paris, implored me to visit her, and comfort her with my presence and counsels. In ten days, Sir, I was here. I found her full of perplexities. The Count was known to be an object of suspicion to the restored government; and it was generally doubted whether he would obtain the sanction of the allied sovereigns to his proposal of sharing the exile of the emperor. It was but natural that Benedetta should look forward with

earnest hope to his fixing his abode at Elba; and, on learning that the English Government was supposed to exercise absolute control in all adjustments regarding the household of Napoleon, she implored me to secure the influence of the Norman family. The marriage of my elder brother-in-law with the daughter of an influential cabinet minister, gave us assurance of a favourable result.

“ ‘ In the beginning of May, therefore, I proceeded to England—to London—to the family of my husband. Of noble origin and endowed with a handsome fortune, in every respect the equal of my husband, I was prepared to receive from them the attentions due to a woman, a stranger, and a relative.

“ ‘ But how, oh ! how was I welcomed !—By some with coldness, — by some with scorn. Though unconnected with Napoleon or the French nation otherwise than by my sister’s compulsory marriage, I was treated as an enemy, — an upstart !—One would have imagined, Chevalier, judging from my cruel reception at Grove Park, that my hands were

embrued in English blood, and that I visited England as an *intrigante* intent upon advancing the interests of the usurper. From Lady Catherine Norman, in particular, I met with the most cruel slights. Though my patience did not enable me to support many days the mortifications heaped upon me, I had time to appreciate the insolence of that hateful woman. I spoke of appealing to *you*, Chevalier, as the head of the Norman family, to engage your influence in behalf of my poor Benedetta. But Lady Catherine informed me with a contemptuous smile, that, as a Catholic, your interference would be rather injurious than otherwise,—that you were a nonentity, or worse;—and that till the succession of her infant son to your title and estates, the Normans of Selwood were likely to remain obscure and powerless!—

“ ‘ For a time, every sentiment was absorbed in resentment at being thus harshly treated by my husband’s family.’ But the claims of Benedetta were stronger than even those of pride. I knew that unless the object of the Count de L—— could be secured, a life of misery was in

store for her; her terror of her husband being so great, that she might be tempted to any rash act securing her from his society.

“ ‘ A new channel of influence, meanwhile, presented itself to my hopes. My father’s only brother, Father Giuseppe Marcodani, Superior of the Jesuits’ College at Rome, is supposed to possess considerable influence with Cardinal Gonsalvi and his Holiness. *His* interference, I am assured, might operate wonders in our favour. With this view, Sir, I am about to visit Italy; and having been recommended by my uncle’s correspondents in Paris to seek the protection of a brother of his order so eminent as the Abbé O’Donnel, I some days since obtained an introduction to your venerable friend. The rest you will divine. *His* amazement, on learning the name and connexions of the sister of the Comtesse de L——, and *mine*, on discovering in the pious ecclesiastic whose escort to Italy would be so singular a comfort to my unprotected condition, the friend and preceptor of my husband’s kinsman.’

“ ‘ You intend, then, Madam, to honour

the Abbé by becoming the companion of his journey?' I inquired, fascinated by the graceful frankness of Madame Norman.

“ ‘ That must depend upon yourself !’—she replied with a smile. ‘ The Abbé assures me that he is too deeply pledged to Sir Richard Norman to——’

“ ‘ Let *that* be no obstacle,’ cried I. ‘ It will afford me sincere delight to forward the object of Madame la Comtesse by ceding my place in the carriage to her charming sister.’

“ The words had scarcely passed my lips, however, before I repented my promptitude, not only on account of the vexation which suddenly overcast the brows of O'Donnel, but because a glance at Madame Norman's lovely countenance brightened by the impulses of joy and gratitude, reminded me that such companionship might have imparted a charm to my Italian journey. The pledge, however, was already accepted; and O'Donnel turned the conversation to general subjects, as if reserving to himself the right of private remonstrance.

“ All I saw of Madame Norman served to in-

crease my admiration. The exquisite modulation of her voice, the ingenuous simplicity of her manners, derived added charm from contrast with the vain and affected Parisians. Nevertheless, I experienced some curiosity to behold the Benedetta in whose behalf my services were thus cavalierly enlisted; and though Madame Norman excused the absence of her sister on the plea that extreme timidity rendered it painful to the Comtesse de L—— to present herself before strangers, I discerned more than once the outline of a tall, graceful figure, traversing the adjoining saloon, and doubted not that the anxieties of the young countess were rendering her an unseen auditress of our conversation.

“It became necessary, however, to take leave. Madame Norman’s allusion to the evening engagement, which caused me to appear in full dress, left me no alternative but departure; and my whole way from her presence to the illuminated *porte cochère* of the Duke, was harassed by the vehemence of the Abbé’s remonstrances. He would not hear of my abandoning my jour-

ney to Italy. He represented in colours equally glowing the advantages our cause might derive from the establishment of an immediate connexion between myself and the Vatican, and the delight I should myself derive from the society of so charming a companion as Madame Norman ; while I, in my turn, alluded with a smile to the risks we might mutually incur from such familiar association.

“ ‘ *My* presence,’ replied the old man, with indignation, “ will, I trust, afford a guarantee both to Rupert Norman and the world, that an affectionate sister, performing an act of disinterested service, was not insulted on her pilgrimage by the gallantry of a well-born Englishman !’—

“ To pacify his irritation, I consented to visit Madame Norman on the morrow, and solicit her approval of our change of projects. But it was chiefly the hope of beholding one whose beauty I had heard described in Parisian society as exceeding that of the Duchesses de Montebello,—de Rovigo,—Madame de St. Jean d’Angely,—and other distinguished ornaments of

the Imperial Court,—that induced me, early on the following day, to present myself at the Hôtel de L——.

“ Unaware that morning visits are, in Parisian society, the exclusive privilege of intimacy, I made so decided a claim to admittance by presenting to the porter a card bearing the name of the Countess’s sister, and announcing myself as a relative, that I was immediately desired to pass on.

“ ‘ *Ces dames sont au jardin,*’ said the *concierge*, pointing to an old-fashioned gilded *grillage*, opening from the court-yard; and following the direction, I found myself in one of those charming retreats which impart to the hôtels of the Faubourg du Roule the charms of a villa or country-house. A gardener was mowing on the lawn the first grass of the season; and in the lady who sat on a rustic bench under the blossomed almond-trees, enjoying the freshness of the scene, I fancied I could recognise my cousin’s handsome wife.

“ A nearer survey convinced me of my error. The lovely creature towards whom I was ad-

vancing was ten years younger, and far more beautiful than her sister. There was something singular in the union of premature intelligence imparted to her countenance by an early encounter with the trials of life, and her air of extreme youth. Her clear brown Italian complexion seemed to derive delicacy from the exquisite regularity of her features; and the softness of her expressive eyes was enhanced by the vivid blushes which almost every word and glance called up into her cheeks. Yet her movements were unembarrassed. The Comtesse was the only woman I had then seen, to whom extreme timidity imparted an indefinable charm without the forfeiture of a single grace.

“My intrusion was duly explained, and quickly pardoned. Already prejudiced in my favour by the warm encomiums of my venerable preceptor,—perhaps, even of her sister,—the Countess seemed to adopt as a relative the man who had been so promptly interested as her friend. She bade me take a place by her side. She inquired with graceful earnestness into my occupations at Paris;—smiled at my enthusiasm,—reproved

my prejudices. At the close of half an hour's conversation, I felt as though, till that moment, I had never looked upon the face, or listened to the voice, of woman. I held my breath that I might not miss the slightest murmur of her soft, melodious intonation. I was afraid of losing a look,—a word,—a gesture.

“Such, Walter, *such* was the influence of your unhappy mother !—

CHAPTER XI.

We met in secret ;—doubly sweet,
Some say they find it so to meet ;
Not such my creed ! I would have given
My life but to have called her mine,
In the full view of earth and heaven.

BYRON.

“ BRIEFLY, briefly, let me pass over the ensuing time,—moments of frantic joy, to be followed by years of anguish and remorse. While attempting to influence my conduct by unworthy means, the Abbé not only defeated his own purpose, but lent his aid towards heaping shame and misery upon my head.

“ Though, true to his calculations, I *did* consent to accompany him to Rome, it was not, as he conjectured, under the influence of the attrac-

tions of his fair companion.—No ! my plans were already matured. For worlds, I would not at that moment have absented myself from Paris. I contrived to have letters awaiting me at Avignon, pretending to necessitate my return to Selwood. He had, of course, no plea to oppose ; and leaving the old man to pursue his journey with his lovely charge, I hastened back to Paris,—hastened to the side of Benedetta,—and under the semblance of brotherly friendship, became her companion, her counsellor, her comforter, *her seducer*. Do not imagine that, because I thus anticipate the period of her fall, the defenceless and unadvised creature was an easy prey. But the harassed existence to which she had been subjected, rendered her more than other women susceptible to the assiduities of tenderness. Of late years, she had dwelt alternately among heartless flatterers, and been exposed to the harshness of a tyrant ;—she had never shared the intimate confidence of affection,—had neither trusted nor been trusted,—neither pardoned nor been forgiven. And now, in the interchange of familiar regard,

though still uncorrupted in mind,—still unswerving in principles,—she confided in me and I in myself, till we were roused from a dream of happiness by the consciousness of guilt.

“ Never, never, my poor Walter, may you experience such self-reproach as mine, in witnessing the remorse by which that young heart was speedily overwhelmed !—Benedetta gave herself up to her sorrow as unreservedly as she had done to her affection ; and when, after two months’ absence, Madame Norman returned from her fruitless journey, there was not even a momentary attempt at concealment on the part of her sister.

“ ‘ Stella must know all,’ cried she, on the announcement of her arrival. ‘ She shall not enfold me to her bosom believing me to be still good,—still pure,—still innocent. She shall know all !—*Then* let her heart determine whether she will still accept me as a sister.’

“ ‘ Exert your courage, my poor girl,’ was, on the other hand, Madame Norman’s exhortation on re-entering the apartment of the Countess. ‘ The general’s application is rejected ; your

husband is exiled to his estates in Provence. I had an interview with him last week at Aix, and have promised to superintend the sale of his property in Paris, and escort you as speedily as possible to his protection.'

" '*He will kill me!*'—burst at once from the pale lips of Benedetta.

" 'No, no! his disposition and character have, on the contrary, undergone a happy revolution. He is now all kindness—all indulgence;—reconciled to his losses and disappointments by the hope that domestic peace and affection will comfort his declining years.'

" '*He will kill me!*'—persisted Benedetta, in the same wild, incoherent tone. 'Sister! I, too, am an altered being;—an abject, miserable wretch!—I have disgraced his name;—I am about to become a mother!—'

" Fearful was the burst of indignant passion with which this confession was received by the impetuous woman, who had so long and truly rejoiced in the well-doing and fair reputation of her nursling,—her pupil,—her more than sister. —On me and on Benedetta her reviling fell with

equal violence. The vehement Italian had scarcely words to convey her scorn of the twofold perfidy degrading my conduct. *I*, a husband,—a man of honour,—a man of noble blood,—to have stooped to a falsehood, in order to involve her fair and innocent sister in a maze of guilt ! She despised me ; and made no concealment of her contempt. But while I honoured the warmth with which she rejected all palliation of our fault, I trembled for the consequence of such unrelenting violence upon the gentle nature and precarious health of Benedetta.

“ I have already admitted to you, that I had quitted England disgusted with my dull home and dreary prospects. Candour compels me to add that I now proceeded to act ungenerously and unjustly towards my unfortunate wife. As an apology for conduct utterly inexcusable, I represented in strong colours to Madame Norman and her sister, not only my indifference towards Matilda, but her undeservingness of my affection. I described her as a cold and careless wife ; and the lovely and accomplished women,

who now absorbed my affection,—already disposed to regard with abhorrence the heretic bearing my name,—whom they could not persuade themselves to regard as my lawful wife,—gradually desisted from their entreaties that I would return home—return to Selwood,—return to Lady Norman,—leaving the unhappy Benedetta to the fate which my madness had embittered!—

“ It was not, however, of Matilda, that either they or I thought at that moment. Our immediate consideration regarded the Count de L——. How was he to be tranquillized,—how tampered with,—how deceived with vain pretences, into sanctioning the prolongation of Benedetta’s sojourn in Paris?—To obtain a medical certificate of her indisposition was no difficult matter ; for the afflicted creature was, in truth, so changed, that her nearest friends often passed her without recognition ; and to dispatch it to Aix without delay was urgent,—for even Stella admitted her conviction that, should the Count conceive the slightest suspicion of the

truth, no personal danger to be incurred by breaking through his sentence of banishment would one moment deter him from hastening to Paris, and wreaking his vengeance on the offenders!—

“ ‘Do not deceive yourself,’ said Madame Norman. ‘Neither strength nor courage would avail to secure my poor sister from his violence. Benedetta would be sacrificed,—justly, perhaps, but barbarously sacrificed—to the injured honour of a man, unsusceptible on all other points; on that, delicate and sensitive as a woman. Do not, I repeat, deceive yourself! Let the Count de L—— arrive at Paris, and my unhappy sister is lost!—’

“ Though, convinced that the excited mind of Stella saw things in an exaggerated light, the agitation of her sister’s mind and deportment testified that *her* terrors, at least, were real.

“ Renouncing, therefore, every suggestion of personal pride, I hastened to exercise my political influence in every attainable channel,

in order to obtain the sanction of the English government to the projects of the Count. My solicitations were successful beyond my hopes. In the course of the ensuing month, the General was permitted to embark at Marseilles, for the Isle of Elba !—

“ Reassured on this painful point, Madame Norman’s next anxiety regarded the disposal of the child about to be born to Benedetta. She exacted that it should be removed, at once, from the presence of the young mother. She would not trust the gentle heart of Benedetta, to so much as a momentary impulse of maternal love ; for well did she surmise that, if once permitted to fold her babe to her bosom, she was likely to hazard all risks to keep it by her side for evermore. The project of your adoption as my legitimate offspring was hers, exclusively hers. She demanded the sacrifice at my hands !—Influenced, perhaps, as much by detestation of the Normans, as by affection for her sister, she required that, in case Benedetta’s child should prove a son, it should be adopted as the heir of Selwood.

“ To prepare Matilda for this imposition would, I feared, prove no easy task.—Circumstances, however, favoured my plans. Lady Norman was eager to accompany me to Paris, (where I had solemnly pledged myself to my humbled, sorrowing Benedetta, to pass the period of her troubles;) and in the course of the winter, Matilda acceded to my entreaties with a gentleness and grace that filled me with remorse. She consented that “*a foundling*” should be imposed upon the world as her son; little dreaming that the child so designated was the object of my dearest affection.

“ I am to blame, perhaps, my son, for dwelling upon circumstances better buried in oblivion. But, in addressing this letter to you, I feel as though I had for the first time found a friend to whom to unfold the history of my trials;—and bitter, trust me, were my sufferings throughout that trying winter,—divided between the society of a lovely and confiding wife, whose merit and triumphs in the world reflected distinction upon my name; and a woman *equally* lovely,—*equally* confiding,—whose peace of mind I had wrecked

for ever ! Day after day did I wander from the side of Lady Norman and the brilliant festivities of the Bourbon court, to the gloomy seclusion of the harassed and suffering Benedetta ; perpetually exciting their anxieties, yet incurring the reproaches of neither. Matilda was too gentle, and her rival too deeply humbled, to experience resentment ; and I, a source of misery to both,—to both a traitor,—was by both generously forgiven !—

“ In the midst of these perplexities, with the moment drawing near which was to crown my delinquency by a new act of fraud,—just as Benedetta’s situation became unconcealable and her sorrows more heavy than she could bear, came the news of Napoleon’s return !—The Comte de L—— was already in France,—the Comte de L—— about to visit Paris !—Stella, who, in her strict seclusion at the Hôtel de L——, had heretofore experienced some solace in the idea of the death-blow she was about to deal to the vanity of Lady Catherine Norman, (who, by a climax of evil fortune, was parading her

follies on the continent,) was now thoroughly overcome! Although the General was invested with a command likely to detain him in the south, he might, at any moment, be required to march through Paris on his way to the army gathering on the frontiers of Belgium; and between remorse at being compelled to require Matilda's sojourn in an enemy's country at such a juncture, and the anguish of apprehending new perils for my lovely, unhappy, uncomplaining Benedetta, my mind was nearly distracted!—I knew that the hour which gave birth to her child, was to be that of our eternal separation. I was to receive and bear you at once to the Chateau de St. Sylvain, where Lady Norman was residing; and from that hour, to return no more to her presence. On such conditions only, had Stella lent her aid to the concealment of this unhappy affair. She would not hear of any further injury to the unsuspecting General, whose letters avouched the warmest and most heartfelt interest in the indisposition of his wife. Satisfied that the expected heir of Selwood,

would be reared in the Catholic faith, and tenderly watched over by a faithful domestic of the Marcodani family, now attached to the service of Matilda, the babe and its unfortunate father were to become strangers to them for ever!—

“ You may readily conceive that this harsh resolution was dictated by the severe judgment of Madame Norman. It was only under awe of her rigid authority that Benedetta consented to reject her innocent child from her bosom ; and in conformity with my previous pledges, and during the insensibility of your mother, I bore you away ; and established my beloved son, —a second Ishmael,—under the governance of a more jealous Sarah.

“ Compelled to hourly deception,—constant anxieties,—to the suppression of every tender impulse,—every parental emotion,—how often, dear Walter—my babe, my boy, *my own, my only son* ;—have I wept in secret over your cradle ; endeavouring to trace in your infant features some resemblance to her who was lost

to me for ever, and shedding, alas ! elsewhere, her tears of repentance.

“ From that period, from time to time, a letter was shewn to me by Ghita containing the stern inquiry, ‘ Doth the child yet live?’—and ‘ The child liveth,’ was the only reply which Stella chose that her sister should receive.—I was never again permitted to behold her face. She was hurried away from Paris. The Hôtel de L—— was sold. The second downfall of Napoleon precipitated the Count anew from his high estate. But on *this* occasion he experienced some alleviation. The newspapers apprized me, that, ‘ in his retirement to his estates in Provence, the Comte de L—— was accompanied by his devoted wife.’

“ The sequel, my son, you have learned from others ;—my prolonged sojourn on the continent,—my return to Selwood,—the birth of the daughter who came to share without diminishing your father’s affection,—the perfect fruition, in short, of my culpable plan.

“ The fate in store for us, Walter, I have

not courage to conjecture. The Abbé O'Donnel,—who, apprized by the spies he had set over my conduct at St. Sylvain, of all that had occurred, was reduced to silence only by my threat of withdrawing my support from the Catholic cause in the event of his exposing the secret of your birth,—addresses me occasionally from Paris, prophesying a thousand evils from my persistence in my act of fraud. But I have promised, and will not recede. All to which I ever pledged myself in order to secure your rights shall be rigidly performed; and should my utmost precautions fail,—should the truth ultimately come to light, and this letter reach your hands,—then, Walter,—then, my beloved boy, pardon and pity your father!—

“Should your unhappy mother yet survive, disturb not by importunity the quiet of her latter days. It is for her to decide in what degree she chooses to admit your claims upon her tenderness. The enclosed letter secures you access to her presence; but I charge you, Walter, from the solemn refuge of the grave, recal not the sorrows of her youth by one single

anxious hour. To Lady Norman you owe the gratitude,—to *her*, the submission, of a son. Discharge both duties, I implore you, as some redemption of the errors of your affectionate and guilty father !—”

CHAPTER XII.

Out, out, affection!
All bond and privilege of nature break,—
Let it be virtuous to be obstinate.

SHAKSPEARE.

SUCH was the letter which had searched out the troubled depths of Walter Norman's heart. One or two imperious missives from Madame Norman to Sir Richard, and a single enclosure addressed in his father's handwriting to the Comtesse de L——, completed the packet. At first, uncertain whether, after so considerable a lapse of years, the object of his solicitude still survived, on his arrival in Paris, he discovered, in the cemetery of Père La Chaise, a cenotaph in honour of her husband,—promoted in his old age by the events of the revolution of 1830, to the

rank of a Field Marshal of France. The inscription on this pompous marble purported that it had been erected to his memory by “his afflicted widow.” The intelligence thus conveyed of her survival, was in some degree consolatory; but the terms of the inscription offended the integrity of Walter. He felt that *his* mother had no right to define herself the “*afflicted widow*” of the Comte de L—— !

The difficulty experienced in obtaining information on the continent concerning even the most eminent private families is scarcely to be credited by those accustomed to the condense and incorporated frame of English society; which, by means of the press, maintains such constant inter-communication. In France, the public is indifferent to the private proceedings of all but its political notabilities. Society is sub-divided into myriads of circles, lacking a common centre; and Walter had to repeat his inquiries, till he trembled at the sound of the name of the Comtesse de L——. After all, his discoveries amounted to nothing. The Countess might still exist,—but she was forgotten. She

did not appear at court,—possessed no hôtel at Paris. Madame de L—— was probably to be heard of at Aix, at the Château des Mesnils, in the neighbourhood of which city her husband had expired.

Thither, therefore, did the anxious traveller direct his steps; and with what emotion, when he reflected that, two years before, he had spent several days in the old Provençal capital,—little conjecturing his peculiar interest in the spot.—

At Aix, his hopes were realized;—intelligence poured in upon him. The memory of the deceased Field Marshal was held sacred in the province where, as a simple peasant, he had joined the army of the convention; and though the military renown which, under the reign of Louis Philippe rendered him a hero, had nearly subjected him to capitulation under that of Louis XVIII., opposite to the windows of the inn where Walter took up his quarters, a pedestal was actually in progress, destined to support the bust of Field Marshal the Comte de L——.

“His widow,—one of the most beautiful women of Napoleon’s court,—resides upon her estate of

Les Mesnils, five leagues off," added the master of the inn, in reply to Walter's interrogations. "*Mais ca ne vaut pas la peine d'en parler!*—she is no longer worth looking at. Many years ago, the Countess changed horses here on her way to the springs of the Mont D'Or; and I never saw a more withered, wasted creature.—Since the death of the Marshal, the Countess has lived quite retired and receives no one.—"

"No one but her *family*, I presume?"—added Walter.

"Family?—Madame la Comtesse is a foreigner,—an Italian,—I never heard of her having a family,—nor Monsieur le Mareschal either.—*His* uncles and cousins were doubtless to be found among the *ramoneurs* of Lyons and Paris. *Mais pardi—un pareil homme se passe de parenté;—un pareil homme est fils de ses œuvres!*—"

On the following day, in pursuance of the information thus afforded, Walter betook himself to Les Mesnils; a compact antiquated little town, washed by the sparkling waters of the river Arc, still retaining its ancient charac-

ter of feudal dependance upon the adjoining château. A tortuous street, scarcely wide enough to afford more than a footway, formed the only communication between the diminutive Place d'Armes, serving as a market-place, and a vast close containing the collegial church of St. Exupère, spacious and rich enough to adorn a considerable city. Facing the church, divided only by its princely court-yard bounded by a curious low stone wall or balustrade, stood the chateau; a vast edifice of dingy brick, ornamented with heavy carvings in stone, surmounted by high peaked roofs and towering chimneys, according to the favourite architecture of the reign of Henri IV. and Louis XVII.

Hither, resolved to reconnoitre the territory and make further inquiries ere he hazarded an intrusion into the Countess's presence, Walter hastened, the moment of his arrival. Although the struggle of contending emotions almost incapacitated him for the task of observation, he was struck by the solemn and cheerless aspect of the place. The vast solitary court-yard,—the prodigious range of windows devoid

of all vestige of human inhabitants,—the wilderness of chimneys, from not one of which smoke was issuing,—imparted to the Château des Mesnils the aspect of a religious house, or rather, of an uninhabited palace.

“If you are looking for the entrance to the gardens, *mon beau m’sieur*,” said a crippled beggar who hobbled after him from the church steps in hopes of a gratuity, “you must go round the court to the *grille d’honneur*, behind the old college. But the gardens are not open to-day. Madame la Comtesse allows them to be visited by strangers only three days in the week. *Charité, mon beau m’sieur,—un petit sou pour Dieu!—*”

Scarcely understanding the words addressed to him, Walter proceeded in the direction pointed out. But on reaching the spot, a grey-headed porter made his appearance from a lodge adjoining the gates, to announce that the gardens were closed to the public. The offer of a gratuity with a view of bribing admittance seemed to offend the old man’s dignity. “The gardens of Les Mesnils were not shewn for money. If

Monsieur chose to return at noon on the following day, he would be admitted."

Still, Walter lingered near the gate,—apparently in admiration of the rich parterres of carnations, dahlias, and other autumnal flowers which covered the vast platform before the southern façade of the house, and formed the prelude to its far-famed English gardens. But his eyes were, in truth, directed towards a company of five or six priests, who were sauntering through the gardens as if in possession of the place; reminding Walter of the hint he had already received at the inn, that the "*chapeaux cornus*" exercised unlimited influence at the château,—"*que Madame la Comtesse s'était plongée dans la dévotion !*" — He had been assured, moreover, by the same authority, "*que Madame la Comtesse détestait les Anglais.*" It was a prejudice,—perhaps because they were heretics,—perhaps because of the animosities cherished against them by *Monsieur le Maréchal*; but certain it was that no English family applying to view the château on unprivileged days, had ever obtained permission !

Deterred by this assurance from hazarding an application, Walter postponed till the following morning a visit which he trusted would afford facilities for nearer approach to the recluse. In the course of the day, however, he ascertained, in desultory conversation with a respectable tradesman of the town, that the widowed Countess, reduced by prolonged ill health to premature old age, was the slave of the *Pères de la congrégation* attached to the college; that for years past she had lived in strict retirement, and from the moment of the Marshal's decease had remained immured in her own apartments.

“ I have sometimes caught a glimpse of *Madame la Comtesse*, sauntering on the terrace with which her rooms are connected,” said the man; “ and though she is little more than forty years of age, you would take her for sixty;—her countenance is so severe, and her face so pallid. But I am wrong to apply a disparaging word to her! *Madame* is careful to maintain, as in the Marshal's lifetime, all the noble charitable establishments of *Les Mesnils*; and I have a notion she would live on a more sociable and

Christian footing with her neighbours, were it not for the priests. It is supposed that they want her to re-endow the college. She has already given a hundred thousand francs of the old Marshal's succession (beyond the sum bequeathed by his will,) for the reparation of the collegiate church. So much the better!—The church is an honour to Les Mesnils!—Still, it would be a happier thing for Madame la Comtesse, if *Monsieur le Supérieur* and his black brethren did not cage her up among them,—terrifying her latter days, and perplexing her household with their authority.”

“Austere devotion!”—“prolonged ill-health!”—Such, then, was the fate of his ill-starred mother. On the morrow, the intelligence Walter had received, was confirmed. A long and leisurely promenade in the gardens enabled him so to win upon the confidence of the venerable *concièrge*, that the old man admitted without much pressing the total subjection of his lady to her spiritual pastors.

“Formerly,” said he, “Madame la Comtesse was kind and indulgent. Thirty years have I

been porter here!—I was placed here by the agents of Monsieur le Général, on the very day the estates of Les Mesnils was bestowed upon him by the Emperor, as a reward for his good service at Austerlitz!—He was a bachelor then; and it was long enough before the events of the war allowed him to come and take a peep at the château. I had been five years in his service before I saw his face.”

“You had no great loss, I fancy,” observed Walter, inconsiderately. “I have heard him described as a good soldier, but a harsh, violent, unfeeling man.”

“Under your pardon, they lied who told you so!”—cried the old *concièrge*, his withered cheek reddening with indignation; “never was there a kinder master—a better man!—He had not so many finicing phrases and congees, may be, as the fribbles of the old *régime* who were brought back to us, Sir, by Messieurs the red-coats, your countrymen, (small thanks to them for the importation!)—but a right good heart,—a right *Christian* heart!—God be with his soul!”

“ I was probably misinformed,” replied Walter, in a deprecating tone. “ But you were speaking, my good friend, of the Countess ?”

“ I was saying, Sir, that when, twenty years ago, or thereabouts, she first visited the château, young and beautiful as she then was, (a pearl, Sir, of a woman !) we servants fancied that it was for a month’s whimsey,—here and away again ;—that she would soon weary of the old woods and turrets of Les Mesnils, and be off to Paris. But no such thing !—From that day to this she has never quitted the place ;—except once when the General was ordered to try the Vichy waters, and she made it a duty to bear him company.”

“ Commanding the most distinguished society of the neighbourhood,” observed Walter, “ the Countess probably ——”

“ Society ?”—interrupted the *concièrge*. “ In the Marshal’s time, it is true, she was obliged sometimes to receive Monsieur le Préfet, the Commandant of Aix, and others of the authorities who came to visit him. But since his death, not a visitor has broke bread in the

château, saving their reverences *les Pères de la congrégation* ; and even with *them*, Madame is never well enough to sit at table."

"Is her health, then, so *very* much enfeebled?—"

"It is nearly a year since I was in my lady's presence, Sir. But as far as my old eyes can judge, she steps out firmly enough when I watch her pacing the terrace of her apartments yonder, early of mornings, or late at evenings."

"I own I am curious to obtain a sight of one whose beauty has been so celebrated," observed Norman, trying to speak unconcernedly. "Could you not admit me into the gardens or the lodge, at an hour when I am likely to obtain a glimpse of her?"

"On public days the gardens are open from daybreak till nightfall," said the old man. "Earlier in the season, when visitors are abundant, Madame la Comtesse never quits her room on those days. But you are the first stranger we have seen here these three weeks ; so that, of late, Madame has been daily on the terrace."

At the old man's suggestion, therefore, and

under a promise of discretion, Walter returned to the *château* towards sunset. The concièrege was already stationed before the *grille*, on the look out for him.

“ *Je craignais que vous n’arriviez pas !* ”—said he ; “ and I did not dare go to the inn to fetch you. Old Joseph’s livery coat is so rarely seen in the streets of Les Mesnils, that it sets people’s tongues wagging whenever I *do* make my appearance. *Mais qu’avez vous, donc, mon bon Monsieur ?* ”—he continued, noting with consternation the sudden change that overspread Walter’s countenance, when, from the window of the lodge, he discerned upon the terrace above, on which the setting sun was shedding its lustre, the tall, slender figure of a woman habited in mourning, escorted by an ecclesiastic with whom she was engaged in discourse. Walter was, in truth, scarcely able to support the conflict of his feelings ; for in that woman, he beheld his mother ;—in that priest, the law-giver by whose austerity her hours were embittered.

Vainly did he attempt to discriminate through

the distance, the features of her face. His eyes were dim with tears. He could trace nothing but two shadowy forms slowly passing through the evening air.

He was recalled to his presence of mind by the voice of the old *concièrge* ; who, beginning to fear from the irritability with which his guest motioned away the offer of a glass of water, that he took some deeper interest in the scene than was altogether warrantable, now presented him the book in which it was usual for visitors to inscribe their names.

“ I omitted this morning, Sir, to request your compliance with the custom of the place,” said Monsieur Joseph, consequentially tendering him a pen.

“ Does Madame la Comtesse ever inspect this book ?”—cried Walter, in a tremulous voice.

“ Occasionally,—rarely, however, till the close of the season.”

“ *Ecoute, mon cher !*” resumed Walter, insinuating into his hand a sum of gold pieces doubling the amount it had ever been the fortune

of that withered palm to enclose. "Contrive that Madame shall see the signature I am about to inscribe before she sleeps, and the same sum I now offer you, awaits you to-morrow. Do not hesitate; you will confer as great a service on your lady as on myself, by acceding to my request."

The name of "Walter Norman of Selwood" was accordingly legibly traced upon a page seldom inscribed with those of his countrymen; and after some further discussion, old Joseph undertook that the Countess's waiting-woman, who was a niece of his own, should present the book that night for her inspection.

On the following day, Walter hastened at an early hour to the lodge to learn the result of this attempt.

"You have brought sad ill-luck to me, Sir," replied the old *concièrge*, in a melancholy tone, after pocketing the remainder of his reward. "Monsieur le Supérieur visited me in person this morning before my latch was up, with orders from the Countess that the gardens should never again be opened to visitors."

And the old man proceeded to enumerate the beauties of the shrubberies of which he had been so long the cicerone, and the names of the illustrious visitors to whom he had enjoyed the satisfaction of displaying them, as if in attestation of the injury inflicted on him.

“ And the book ? ”—impatiently interrupted Walter.

“ Ay, ay !—the book,—*sacredi !* as if we had not heard enough of the book,—the origin of all the mischief !—The book, Sir, is henceforward to be deposited at the château.”

“ You are certain, however, that it was submitted to the Countess ?—”

“ Certain as of the deluge. Mademoiselle Antonine came down to the lodge last night after dark, to cross question me about my motives for having it shewn to her lady. The Countess, it seems, was furious on reading the name you had written ; and instantly sent off one of the footmen to the College, in search of Monsieur le Supérieur, who was closeted with her till nearly midnight.”

“ *Furious !*—Her only sentiment, then, on

reading my name, was anger !”—murmured Walter, as he retraced his steps to the inn. “ Such, then, are the impulses of her heart, when the chord is touched to which its fondest affections ought to vibrate !—This woman must be more firmly,—more sternly dealt with.—”

And without a moment’s hesitation, he dispatched, in his own name, a letter to the château, requesting in strong but respectful terms, an immediate interview with Madame la Comtesse de L——.

A verbal answer was as speedily returned. “ Madame la Comtesse de L—— was too infirm in health to receive visitors ; and regretted being unable to make any exception to her rule.” Snatching up his hat, he proceeded straight to the château ; and accosting one of the domestics lounging in the vestibule, desired him to acquaint his lady that an English gentleman having family letters of consequence to deliver to the hand of the Countess, demanded immediate admittance to her presence.

But this expedient procured only a reiteration of the former answer. “ The Countess

would receive no visits. Any letter with which the English gentleman was charged, must be delivered to *Monsieur le Supérieur de la Congrégation.*”

“Is he in the house?”—cried Walter, every greater emotion giving way to resentful feelings.

“It is not yet the hour of the Supérieur’s daily visit to the château,” replied the servant; “if Monsieur chooses to return in a couple of hours, he will be sure of meeting him.”

Already, Walter had determined otherwise. Proceeding straight to the dilapidated gates of the college, he demanded admittance to one whose sacred functions rendered it impossible for *him* to issue orders of exclusion.

There is something in the tranquil atmosphere of a religious house peculiarly soothing to those who pass the threshold in a spirit of piety and peace; but to persons predisposed to attribute hypocrisy and evil dealing to its inmates, nauseous and irritating. Ushered by a demure acolyte along a mildewed corridor towards the dismantled study of his Superior, Walter fancied that the denuded condition of the place bore at-

testation of the interested views of those whom already he regarded as his adversaries. Nor did the inauspicious countenance of Father Cyrillus, the Superior of the establishment, serve to disarm his prejudices.

“I present myself to you, reverend Father,” said the impetuous young man, not waiting for the lofty interrogatory with which he saw that the priest was preparing to address him, “to demand, through your assistance, access to a lady under your spiritual governance.”

“You are, I conclude, the English traveller to whom Madame la Comtesse de L—— (the lady to whom I presume you to allude,) has this morning denied admittance?”—replied the Superior, slightly pointing to a seat, but making no attempt to rise from his own.

“Admittance was denied me in her name,” persisted Walter. “But my claims upon the Countess are of such a nature that it is not in the heart of woman to have issued the mandate I received.”

“Madame la Comtesse is mistress of her

actions,” replied the Superior, with hauteur. “Those of your nation, Sir, have at all times been unwelcome guests at Les Mesnils; *wherefore*, it is not for *me* to determine.”

“You are the Countess’s confessor,—her director !”—cried Walter, glancing round as if to ascertain that no eaves’ droppers were at hand; “in that sacred capacity, you *have* become aware of her motives for this antipathy ! Know, therefore, that the lover whom Madame la Comtesse may have made it her duty to avoid, has long been numbered with the dead ;—I, reverend father,—am his only son.”

“The name you last night dispatched as your introduction to her presence, informed me as much,” replied the Superior, without displacing a muscle of his sallow countenance; “it is on that account you are more pointedly excluded than others. For two years past, it has been my task to watch over the spiritual condition of the Countess; and I have made it my duty, young Sir, to prepare the mind of my penitent for such an attempt as you are now meditating.

You do not take us by surprise ! I charge you, therefore, out of respect to my sacred calling and to the instincts of nature, refrain from molesting one who has long risen superior to the fatal temptation of worldly affections !”

“ The temptation of a mother’s love ! ”—scornfully reiterated Walter. “ Happy the mortal whose temptations are of no severer nature. But you mistake me and my purposes. You conclude me to be a needy adventurer, having views upon the Countess’s fortune;—a heretic, disposed to withdraw her benefits from the catholic church and its dependencies.—Re-assure yourself !—I refer you, *reverend Père*, to your principal at Rome, for attestation of the personal distinctions conferred upon me by the Sovereign Pontiff. Through life, my social position has been equal to that of the Comtesse de L—— ; and at this moment, I am heir to one of the richest commoners and most influential senators of Great Britain.”

The demeanour of the reverend Father be-

came suddenly softened by this opportune announcement; the utmost importance being attached by foreigners (even by reigning sovereigns) to a British member of parliament.

“I should esteem myself unfortunate, *mon fils*, if anything in my words or deportment induced you to attribute to unwarrantable influence the resolution taken by the Countess.—But you appear to attach strange importance to this interview?—”

“Does it need explanation that a son should desire to throw himself at the feet of his only surviving parent?—”

“In that case, you are somewhat tardy in admitting the impulse! More than twenty years has the Countess abided unmolested under yonder roof!—”

“A few months ago,” replied Walter, “I was ignorant of her very existence!—But from the hour the fatal secret of my birth was disclosed to me, I have existed only in the hope of looking upon my mother’s face!—Let her deny

me, and I will not answer for the rash extremities to which I may be driven !—”

“ And the secret was disclosed at length ?”—demanded the priest, without even noticing his menace.

“ By a letter bequeathed by my father. A packet superscribed by Sir Richard Norman’s hand, must be delivered to the Countess by my own. Be present, if you choose, at our interview ; but as God hears and judges me,—ere the sun sets, I will reach the presence of my mother !—”

“ To remonstrate with the gracelessness of one so reckless would, I perceive, be of small avail,” observed the priest, rising and taking his hat from the wall. “ Follow me, young Sir. To avoid the perpretation of an outrage, you *shall* see the Comtesse de L——. But you will not gather from her lips sentiments more auspicious than you have received from mine.”

Ten minutes afterwards, Walter, after being ushered by Father Cyrillus up the vast gloomy painted staircase of the château, along a suite

of antiquated rooms hung with old fashioned tapestry, was requested to wait in a small and more commodiously furnished chamber opening to the terrace already described ; while the Superior proceeded to represent to the Comtesse de L—— his peremptory pretensions.

CHAPTER XIII.

A heart generous and noble,—noble in its scorn
Of all things low and little ;—nothing there
Sordid or servile !

ROGERS.

VAIN were it to describe Walter Norman's state of mind as he stood watching the door through which he trusted that the Countess was to make her appearance. The chair on which he leaned for support, seemed about to give way under his convulsive grasp. Yet notwithstanding these demonstrations, his emotions were of no tender nature. Stung to the quick by the conduct of the Countess, he had so far resumed the mastery over himself, as to resolve

that no womanish tear should shame his cheeks,—no fond epithet escape his lips. He would stand before the woman who had rejected the yearnings of his filial love, as a judge;—then, having delivered the letter of Sir Richard Norman to her hands, depart for ever from her sight!—

The door slowly unclosed, and Walter's heart beat with insupportable violence. But his brow remained calm; and he stirred not a step towards the lady who advanced into the chamber, led to a seat in the position furthest from the light, by the hand which she seemed to have selected for the absolute control of her movements. Eagerly as her son had longed to look upon her face, he dared not as yet raise his eyes directly towards her. While obeying the dictates of courtesy by a formal obeisance, he indistinctly beheld a face, pale even to ghastliness, and cold even to severity; and trembled to hear the sound of voice accompanying this austere countenance. She spoke, however,—and his alarm subsided!—

“ You have business with me, I understand,”

said the Countess, in a firm, but not ungentle voice. “ I pray you let it be as briefly as possible dispatched.—I am an infirm woman, —a weak and infirm woman ;—anxious only to descend into the grave without disturbance of that blessed peace and equanimity with which the mercy of Heaven and the counsels of pious friends have comforted my latter days.”

“ God forbid, Madam, that I should be the means of ruffling your tranquillity !”—replied Walter, with stern contempt ; “ and God keep me from desiring such selfish serenity as can be obtained only at the expense of all sensibility to the welfare of others. Trust me, I will hazard no single word—no single look of appeal—likely to endanger your quietude !—But had I dreamed of finding you thus completely self-absorbed, I would have spared myself a weary pilgrimage, undertaken in the hope of exciting momentary sympathy, in the heart wherein my own life’s blood is warmly flowing.—I would have spared myself the journey.—I would have denied myself the fond presentiments by which it was solaced.—Yet, if I obtain nothing further

by my intrusion into your presence, I obtain a lesson ;—a harsh one,—a cruel one,—but valuable as tearing away the last illusion endearing life to my soul !—”

Walter had not intended to speak thus. But the words burst in spontaneous vehemence from his lips ; and as he raised his eyes towards the Countess at the close of his address, he fancied he could discern a glance of deprecation directed by his unhappy mother towards the Superior, as if imploring his sanction to her relenting. No sign, however, escaped the priest ; nor any token of tenderness the penitent over whom he exercised his iron sway.

“ I have had the honour of acquainting Madame la Comtesse,” observed Father Cyrillus to the stranger, “ that your errand at Les Mesnils is simply to deliver a letter, of which you are the depositary.”

“ It is true that I came hither with the purpose of placing such a deposit in her hands,” replied Walter. “ But reflection convinces me that the letter in question was addressed by my father to a heart warm with the best instincts of

womanly tenderness; and that he would not have desired to waste his confidence upon a soul hardened by the harshness of a taskmaster."

The Superior, darting a fiery glance towards Walter, was about to utter an angry rejoinder. But the Countess indicated by a sign her desire that the young man should be suffered to proceed.

"I am aware, Madam," he accordingly resumed, "that my father has made a fruitless effort in my favour. At the hour when, summoned to the presence of his Maker, the consciousness of his guilt and its results weighed heavily on his soul, Sir Richard Norman anticipated the destiny eventually to fall upon his son. He saw that the time would come, when, cut off from all social ties,—all human connexions,—the wretch born to no community of kindred,—the predestined alien,—orphan,—castaway,—would hunger and thirst after the impulses of natural affection,—and in vain!—He foresaw me exposed to the scorn of society,—to the mockery of the world;—and feeling that all this and more were amply redeemed by the precious ransom of a

mother's love, he hazarded in my behalf some allusion to the hopes and promises of those happier days, when, for his child, the father had a right to anticipate a renewal of the affection once lavished upon himself."

As Walter gave utterance to these heartfelt words, gradually laying aside all reserve, he assumed the fervent eloquence of passion; while the Countess, as by degrees she raised her eyes towards him, seemed fascinated and spell-bound by the tone and deportment so vividly recalling to her mind the lover of her youth.—At length, as he traced the touching picture of his own isolation, she clasped her hands together in anguish; and but for the restraining presence of her Director, would probably have arisen and thrown herself upon the neck of her son. The stern glance of the Superior served, however, to restore her to submission.

"Fear nothing!" resumed Walter, noticing with contempt the varying expression of her countenance. "I will not presume upon my father's tenderness to enforce my claims upon

yours. This shall be the last time, Madam, of my intruding into your presence. We have met. I have looked upon the face which, waking or sleeping,—in my dreams,—in my prayers,—in solitude,—in society,—has, for months past, been the object of my solitudes!—I have heard your voice,—my own eyes have witnessed your alienation.—Nature has pleaded nothing in my favour.—I stand before you even as the child of a stranger; and, since such your heart and sentiments, I will depart in silence, and in silence preserve the memory of your insensibility.—I will not complain,—I will not murmur.—My fate will be only a degree more hard—more bitter. But in compensation, Madam, I will retain my father's letter, as a token that *he*, at least, was not callous to the degradation of the humiliated being his errors had called into existence!"

"Give me the letter!"—cried the Countess, twice clearing her voice to speak, ere she could utter an intelligible sound.—

Walter hesitated.

“ I have *a claim* upon your obedience,” persisted Madame de L——. “ Give me the letter !”

When at length after a moment's hesitation, Walter, taking it from his bosom placed it on the table beside her, his hands trembled on finding himself so near his unnatural mother that their dresses rustled against each other. Indescribably agitated, he stopped short as he was about to recede from the table ; and fixed his eyes upon her face, as if his whole soul were concentrated in search of respondent sensibility. Overpowered by this clinging, searching gaze, her bosom heaved with the oppression of her embarrassed respiration. She raised her eyes wistfully towards Walter, as if imploring forbearance ; but, on beholding in *his* the rolling tears which a strong effort alone enabled him to retain unshed, a hectic flush traversed her pallid cheeks, and her lips became tremulous with emotion. In another moment, Walter was at her feet, his face concealed in the folds of her dress—and thick coming sobs bursting with frantic violence from his bosom !—

Father Cyrillus hastened to disengage the Countess from the embraces of her son.

“Leave us,” said she, faintly motioning to the Superior to desist. “Leave us together.—You have nothing to apprehend from my weakness.—You perceive that I am mistress of myself. But before I lose sight of him for ever, a few words of explanation must enable him to form a fairer interpretation of his mother.”

Without a pretext for refusal, the Superior, concealing his vexation under an obeisance of hypocritical humility, retired from the room ;—and ere Walter had risen from his knees, the Countess’s arms were flung around him, while a mother’s first and only kiss was fervently imprinted upon his forehead.

“It needed no letter to announce you to me !”—she murmured, after slowly and tenderly perusing his features ; “you are his image,—his very image !—In *you*, Sir Richard Norman stands before me !—You love him,—you venerate his memory.—You weigh *his* fault as light, in comparison with mine.—You estimate his parental affection as warm, in comparison

with mine. But ere we part, learn at least to appreciate the motives of my conduct. Your father, you say, revealed to you the mystery of your birth ;—that is, he related the fall of an inexperienced, uncounselled woman, and the fraud to which the impetuosity of my poor sister compelled my assent.—Your own experience further reminds you that, for twenty years, your mother has survived that fall,—that fraud ;—yet deigned to take no cognizance of your existence !—Listen, Walter, to my exculpation !—

“ The late Comte de L—— was doubtless described to you by your father, (for thus was he described to *him* by *myself*), as coarse,—brutal,—jealous,—cruel,—a man unworthy of, and incapable of preserving the affections of his wife. At the period of my marriage I was fifteen !—A thoughtless girl, recently emancipated from the nursery, such was the opinion I formed of a man thirty years older than myself,—uncouth in person,—uncultivated in mind ; with all the roughness of the camp about him,—enforcing every sentence with an oath,—commencing

his days' pleasures with a dram, and crowning them with a pipe !—I loathed him—literally loathed him ; for at that unpractised age, such trivialities exercise a serious influence on the affections. I saw nothing in my husband beyond his superficial blemishes. From the period of my ill-starred marriage, however, to that of my acquaintance with your father, I was not many weeks molested with his society.—You know the rest !—Young, unadvised, and self-reliant, I formed an attachment which soon terminated in guilt and misery.

“ I will not describe to you, Walter, the anguish, the terrors, the struggles, the remorse, which agitated my distracted mind previous to your birth ; for these, a feeling heart will readily conceive.—All I have now to unfold, regards the incidents of my subsequent existence.

“ Three months after your birth, I was brought, by my sister, here to this very château ; and placed, according to her promise, under the protection of my husband. My heart sank within me as I entered the gates ! —But I was not wholly without consolation, I

trusted I was come to die;—humiliated, heart-broken, I looked forward only to the repose of the grave.—Judge, however, what were the emotions of my soul on entering for the first time, after all that had occurred, the dreaded presence of the Comte de L—— !

“ ‘ This is indeed kind and considerate of you,—to visit the old soldier in his exile,’—cried he, after imprinting a rough kiss on my cheek in presence of the servants, and holding me at arm’s length, as if to examine the changes effected in my person by the lapse of the last three years.—‘ Handsomer, *mille bombes* !—a thousand times handsomer than when I left you for Burgos !—Ah ! Madame la Comtesse !—it will be a *cruel* trial for you to bury all these roses and lilies among the forests of Provence !—’

“ ‘ My sister, Sir, is ambitious only of sharing your retirement,’ interrupted Stella. ‘ With your permission, she will abide with you at Les Mesnils without dreaming of further change.’

“ The General surveyed me with a scrutinizing, but not unkindly eye.

“ ‘ *Is it so ?*’ was his abrupt inquiry.

“ ‘ I earnestly hope to remain here till the end of my days ! ’ said I,—it was needless to add that I believed them to be already numbered.

“ ‘ Then it shall not be *my* fault if a single one of them is darkened by a care,’ cried the Count.—‘ *Jour de Dieu ! je suis bon enfant, moi !*—Hitherto, Madame la Comtesse, you and I have misunderstood each other. I was coxcomb enough to flatter myself that the lovely girl forced by the Emperor into my arms, might take a fancy to my *vieille moustache*. I am wiser now !—Sounder heads than mine are sometimes mended,—instead of being broken,—by a downfall, I have learned to look philosophically upon the chances of life, and would fain teach *you* the same lesson.—*Sacrebleu !* We have both had our trials,—we have still our cares !—*Mais du courage, mon enfant,—avec le temps on en vient au bout.*—The Emperor gave you a husband,—I offer you a father !’—

“ ‘ I accept the offer with respect and gratitude,’ said I, seizing the rough hand which he abruptly extended towards me.

“‘Then there is no reason, *morbleu* ! that quiet days may not be yet in store for us !’—said he, glancing significantly towards my sister, a delighted witness of the turn this dreaded interview was taking.—‘The château is large enough for both of us, without jostling.—Examine it when you will, *ma petite femme* !—Choose your own suite of apartments, and have them arranged according to your fancy.—*There*, be assured that no one, not even myself, shall ever intrude without your leave. *Sacrebleu ! on ne passe pas !—le consigne !—toujours respect au consigne !—Qu’en dites vous, Madame la Comtesse ?*—Are you content with the regulations of the garrison of Les Mesnils ?’

“From that hour, Walter, the conventions self-imposed by the General were strictly fulfilled. My sister departed for Trieste at the close of the winter, leaving her poor Benedetta in some measure reconciled to her lot. The General never invaded my solitude without previously asking permission to become my visitor ; his deportment being at all times, in

accordance with his promise, that of an indulgent father soothing the melancholy of a wayward child.

“ ‘ *Des larmes ? Fi donc !* ’—cried he, the first time he surprised me in tears. ‘ *Allons, allons, ma chère enfant !*—If I see more of these briny drops, I shall understand that you are weary of your sojourn here, and invite all the *gros bonnets* of the province to Les Mesnils to assist me in driving away the blue devils !—’

“ Another time, he adduced a still more potent argument by which to up dry my tears. ‘ I knew that your courage would fail,’ said he. ‘ It was not in the nature of things for a young creature so flattered,—so *mijotée* by the world,—to devote herself to the society of a poor old weather-beaten soldier !—What with gout, rheumatism, and the smart of old wounds, which gall me now and then more than I care to own,—I know I am often peevish,—often troublesome !— But the reproach of your tears is too much for me. If I see you weep again, *ma petite femme*, I shall beg you to renounce a task to which your young heart is unequal !—’

“ God knows he was *never* peevish,—*never* troublesome!—But by such an appeal to my generosity, he knew that he had placed the surest restraint upon the indulgence of my sorrows.

“ But this was not all. The intimacy of domestic life under the same roof gradually developed to me the character of the man to whom I was united. Hitherto, I had known him only as the bravest of men, at an epoch when all men were brave. I *now* learned to what a pitch of love and veneration he had contrived to attach the hearts of his men. On his dismissal from the army, the dissatisfaction of the troops was expressed even to mutiny. He had been an idol among them;—open-handed,—open hearted,—sharing their privations as well as their perils;—comforting the hospital, and cheering the infirmary, as well as inspiring the field of battle. Beloved by the aged as a son,—by the active as a brother,—by the young conscripts as a father,—the separation was a cruel trial to them all.

“ In the privacy of civil life, the virtues

of the old soldier did but experience further development. Devoid of immediate kindred, he had raised the few distant relations remaining to him to comfort and independence. Not a man in his native village was able to say—‘ I am the kinsman, or I was once the comrade, of Archambaud L——, but *he* is a general,—*he* is wealthy now,—and I remain poor and needy !’ —During his last campaigns, the General had gradually despatched home to Les Mesnils a host of his disabled veterans, besides settling on his estates the widows and orphans of many of the brave fellows who had fallen at his side ; and on our installation at the château, it was his care to provide fitting asylums for the reception of these protégés,—carefully avoiding, however, the aspect and discipline of the almshouse. Cheerful cottages, each with its little garden, were awarded to those who were able to dispense with constant attendance ; while an airy infirmary, constructed in a wing of the château, awaited the more ailing ; and never shall I forget the look of fatherly affection with which the General regarded me, when,

on the installation of our pensioners, I flew from chamber to chamber,—almost gay—*almost* happy—while contemplating the results of his beneficence.

“ ‘ *Bien,—mon enfant, bien !* ’ cried he. ‘ *C’est très bien !*—These exertions to create to yourself a new interest in life, are meritorious and honourable. You are doing your best, my poor girl; and the blessing of God is ever prompt upon such efforts. There is no position of life so wretched, so fallen, but that our exertions may render it the foundation of virtue. Remember this.—Persevere,—and you may yet be happy !’

“ Encouraged by his approval, I devoted myself with ardour to my new duties. The hope of obtaining his esteem animated my courage. I allowed myself no leisure for retrospection. I lived in the present;—I dedicated my whole strength, my whole faculties, to the solace of others. My husband’s precept that it was never too late to be virtuous, seemed to breathe new life into my exertions.—Thus occupied, the humility with which I had learned to reverence

my husband deepened into affection. While he watched over and encouraged me as a father, I loved him like a child. Any other sentiment would have been profanation to his grey hairs. I was a dishonoured woman,—*he* all that was good and true!—From the moment he had learned to estimate in its true light the incongruity of our union, and to condemn his own weakness in having sanctioned the misjudging project of the Emperor, he had ceased to regard me as his wife.—I was now his pupil,—his daughter,—his heir;—and *he* the object of my unqualified veneration!—

“ Thus, Walter, thus passed my tranquil years; in the discharge of active duties,—in the enjoyment of gratitude and peace,—and my youth fled from me unheeded.—Wherever I went, I heard blessings lavished upon the name of my husband;—and many a death-bed have I knelt beside, where the last breath of the dying recommended to God the happiness of the most princely of benefactors. What was to me *now* my husband’s want of scholarship, or want of polish!—Had he not fulfilled the noblest pur-

poses of existence, by devoting to his country the strength and vigour of his manhood, and to the benefit of his fellow creatures the opulence by which the sacrifice had been repaid?

“ Was it for his wife, Walter, to dishonour the roof of that venerable man, by dwelling upon memories of guilty love?—Had I hazarded the disturbance of his tranquillity by instituting inquiries into your welfare, I might have broken the heart of one whose life was a source of blessings to thousands!—I held my peace, therefore. I subdued the instincts of nature. I was thus offering up to my husband the only sacrifice of atonement in my power.—I noted not the lapse of time. Absorbed in complicated household duties youth and beauty departed from me, not only unregretted, but unnoticed.

“ At the close of eighteen years, old age had laid its hand gently, but firmly, on the venerable head of my husband. The step, long faltering, ceased at last to bear him his round of visits of consolation.—The white hair waxed thinner upon his fallen temples.—The soldier’s rough voice and impatient oaths had given place to words of

peace and resignation. Then, Walter, then was it the comfort of his wife to kneel beside the chair of the decaying veteran ;—to satisfy him with tidings of his sick—of his poor,—and solace him with promises that, when he was gone, I would be unto them all that he had ever been ! Expressions of sympathy in his own sufferings he would never receive. ‘ I am happy,’ was his reply, ‘ I am well ;—for feebleness is the health of old age. —Next to death upon the field of battle, calm extinction amid loving and regretful hearts, is the noblest lot vouchsafed to sinful man.—And you *will* regret me, my sweet wife !—You *will* lament the veteran whose esteem has been the support of your well-doing. The respect earned from the depths of my soul by the perfectness of your love, will be your passport to eternal mercy !—’

“ ‘ Stop !’ cried I, driven one day almost to frenzy by a panegyric which conveyed such bitter reproaches to my conscience. ‘ You deceive yourself,—*I* myself have deceived you !—I am *not* worthy your esteem—I am *not*——’

‘ Hush !’—said he, laying his wasted hand

upon my lips, with a beneficent smile,—‘ I know all !—From the *first*, I have known all !—I have never been deceived. Your father watched over your repentance, till your husband was able to bestow perfect forgiveness upon his wife. As a recompence for all I have borne, bear with me, dearest, till the end ;—then, give a few tears to the old man’s memory,—and the remnant of your days to happiness !—’

“ Yes, Walter,—from the first he had known all. —But on examining my fault with conscientious scrutiny, pity mingled with his blame ;—pity for the young girl flung into his arms, whom he had despised and avoided for her levity, instead of aiding her with the counsels or restraining her by the authority of a husband. Self-convicted, he forgave !—as those who trespass are enjoined to pardon, lest their trespasses call down the vengeance of the Most High !—

“ Elevated at the eleventh hour to new distinctions by the Revolution which gave liberal governors to France, the veteran did not long survive his promotion to the rank of Field Marshal.—It was a dreary hour for your mother

that followed the loss of that best of friends. When the passing bell announced his departure, the poor wept their benefactor ;—I, alone, was denied the solace of tears !—

“ Providence, however, still prospered me by its mercies. A brotherhood of venerable men drawn by the events of the Revolution from their establishment in the capital, took refuge at Les Mesnils. The dilapidated walls of the old college annexed to the château, which, till the completion of our infirmary, had received our sick, were not yet levelled with the ground, and afforded an asylum to the fugitives. Deprived by the decree of government of their office as the instructors of youth, these pious men did not disdain to assuage the terrors of a penitent soul in its time of trouble. Unable to look abroad for consolation, the words of grace,—the promises of the church,—have maintained, and will I trust maintain my courage during the brief remnant of my days. Long concealment of an ever-gnawing care has forestalled for me the epoch of old age ; and my decaying health promises me a speedy release from bondage !—

“In this habitation, where every object recalls the memory of my better days and invites me to rejoin my husband in the grave, I should have held it an act of treachery had I devoted my widowhood to the renewal of a tie which, during the life of my benefactor, duty compelled me to disavow.—When your writing, Walter, was laid before me, the struggle was great ; but I felt that to surmount the temptation thus afforded, was a sacrifice to be tendered to the dead, in requital for years of generous forbearance. My judgment was confirmed by that of my spiritual adviser. Yes!—here, where the echoes of that honest voice still appear to linger, and where the last breath of that noble breast exhaled to heaven,—I *must* not—I *dare* not—clasp to my bosom the son of Sir Richard Norman !—”

As the Countess ceased to speak, Walter raised his head which had long been declined upon his breast ; and his composed but pallid countenance attested the impression produced on his soul by the narrative of his mother.

“Go to yonder church,” she continued,—point-

ing to the Gothic towers discernible through the lofty window. “ You will find there a column dedicated to the memory of the dead by the simple earnings of the poor !—The banners suspended above it, were taken by royal permission from the Invalides to which they had been consigned by the bravery of the Count de L——; The inscription upon the grave below,—

Deo, Regi, pauperibusque carissimus!

was placed there by a public decree.—And shall I, in defiance of such trophies,—such renown,—such virtues,—embrace before the face of the world a son born to have been my blessing, had not his birth conveyed dishonour to my husband?—”

Walter’s reply,—when he found courage to reply,—was patient and moderate. He saw that it would require time to counteract the strong bias of his mother’s opinions, and the influence of designing adversaries. But he had time,—he had his whole life before him—for the effort. He affected therefore, for the present,

no opposition,—no remonstrance. He trusted to nature to plead for him, and he did not trust in vain.

Already, the Countess's mind was relieved as from a heavy burthen, by her affecting explanations. By degrees, she permitted herself to hazard inquiries in return. The tale of Walter's sorrows was unfolded to her, with all the events of his till lately unclouded life. He spoke of Lady Norman,—of his sister,—of the friends created for him by the undeserved wretchedness of his situation;—and the Countess's tears had long been falling ere she was aware of the transgression.

The hours went by unnoticed. Evening came, —and Walter was still by his mother's side!—The Superior was summoned; and read in the countenances of both, his sentence of defeat. The young Englishman was already invited to return on the morrow, in order to inspect the numerous foundations and establishments annexed to the château by its late owner. On the morrow, he was invited to return the follow-

ing day, for a last farewell.—Before the close of the week, he had been folded again and again in the arms of a mother who, on the precept of her venerated husband that no situation is too fallen to be made the foundation of virtue, was persuaded to institute a belief that maternal love, so indulged as to afford no scandal to the living,—no offence to the dead,—was but the perfecting of her probation.

The inhabitants of Les Mesnils (saving the reverend members of the College, who, finding nothing to apprehend from Walter's rapacity, judged it wiser to withdraw their opposition, and preserve the secret) were misled by a similarity of name between the young stranger and the Countess's sister, into supposing him her nephew. Leaning upon his arm, their benefactress visited them as usual;—often pausing to point out to her guest the wisdom and tenderness of the deceased Maréchal's provisions for their comfort.—They saw her gradually assume a more healthful and happier aspect; and though ignorant that the iron grasp of bigotry

which had seized upon her soul in the weakness of affliction, was gradually relaxing under a holier influence, uttered blessings upon the stranger, who seemed sent as a messenger of peace to one whose tears had not been wept in vain !—

CHAPTER XIV.

The darkest storm
Raves but to lend enhancement to the calm,
Whose holy hours succeed :—hours of sweet peace,
With setting sunlight and soft summer airs
Breathing celestial influence.

SOUTHEY.

TIDINGS of this happy change in his destinies were soon despatched by Walter to his anxious English friends. Compelled to quit Provence to assume the duties of a diplomatic appointment obtained for him at the Court of Naples, he readily pledged himself to return to Les Mesnils in the course of the following summer.

“ I live but till we meet again ! ”—was the fond exclamation of the Italian mother, who, having

once given free course to her affections, could only love with enthusiasm. “Duty enchains me here. The trust bequeathed to me requires me to expend the remainder of my days at Les Mesnils. But my comfort will be in hearing of your well-doing,—of your happiness,—and at rare intervals, looking upon your face.—A more prolonged blessing would be greater than my deserts !—”

In fulfilment of his engagement, Walter revisited the château last spring, on his way home to Fern Hill. His business in England was to bestow the hand of his lovely sister (after being a second time refused to the son of Lord Mornington, the new heir of Selwood,) upon the favourite nephew and future successor of Sir Thomas Audley ; and the bustling Lady Audley, gratified by the prospects of this family match of her own devising, is already plotting with Mrs. Avesford to fix her favourite Walter in England, by equally auspicious alliance. For in spite of the loss of his honours, Walter, the living image of her first love, still remains her favourite !—Her nephew, the Spring-chicken,

after being first flattered and next bullied into a *mésalliance* with Miss Amy Redely of the Forges, is as thoroughly in her ill graces as in those of her haughty sister-in-law, his mother Lady Mornington ; and though Walter, true to his friendship for the cousin who was faithful to him in his misfortunes, eloquently pleads the cause of Captain Norman by setting forth a bad education as the source of his follies,—the kith and kin, as well as the neighbours and tenants of the Selwood family, have never ceased to regret the banished heir. While Lady Farleigh's daughters, still unmarried, resent the promotion of the conceited Amy, the tenantry complain of the ruinous absenteeism of the Morningtons, who deserted the Manor from the moment of the untoward match,—Selwood Manor being at this moment far more desolate and lonely than in the gloomiest days of Sir Richard Norman.

A new day, meanwhile, has dawned upon the precincts of Fern Hill. The eyes of the country are upon the spot,—the hopes of happy hearts,—the blessings of the poor!—Hand in

hand, Avesford and his pupil are pursuing the task of improvement. An official appointment of some moment is about to give ample scope to the development of Walter's talents; and to recal him to London, where Avesford's house is the chartered gathering-place of the friends of learning, science, and humanity.

“If it were not for a sight of Matty's doleful countenance now and then, I swear I should forget that matters were ever otherwise among us than at present!”—said Cruttenden Maule, one day, in one of his flying visits to Wolham rectory. “However, even *her* long face has grown shorter since she saw her girl so happily settled in life!—The Farleigh dowager has been staying with her at Halesewell ever since Constance and her husband went to settle at Audley House; and they comfort each other, I suppose, by prosing over old times and railing at the world. Old Crutt used to swear that, egg or bird, Matty would never lose her liking for lords and ladies!—However, as she marred the happiness of her young days by marrying out of her sphere, 'tis fit she should

fish what comfort she can out of the same troubled waters."

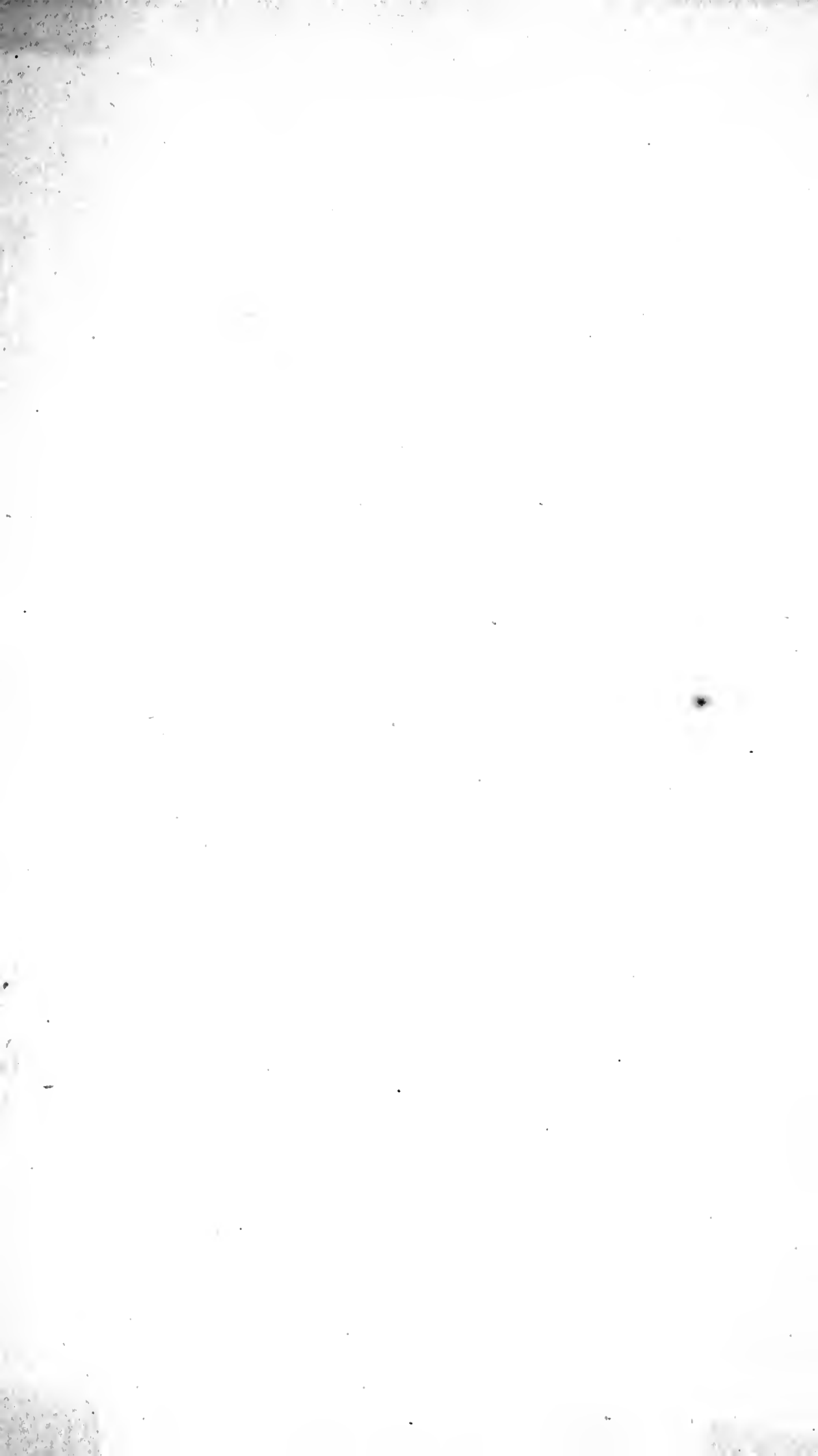
Lady Norman is, in fact, still as ever the slave of her own weakness. Unable to surmount her jealousy of Walter's superior influence with her family, she retires as much as possible from their society; and, dissatisfied with herself and others, is not sorry to secure herself from the unceremonious intrusions of her plain-dealing brother, by inviting her titled friend to become her guest. For Lady Farleigh has been driven from the Castle and Tuxwell Park, by the untimely death of her husband and the untimely marriage of her son;—the Earl having lost his life from a neglected fall in hunting, and his successor his place in society, by a match with a public singer of indifferent reputation. Glad to escape from the doleful aspect of their mother's weeds, Lady Sophia and her sister are spending the period of their mother's widowhood at Brighton, with their spinster aunt Lady Emily, — a patroness of every charity bazaar, and a chartered solicitress for the funds of all the lying-in charities and teetotalisms in the kingdom.

To listen to her friend Sophia's lamentations over the heartlessness of her daughters and the backslidings of her son, (who is, nevertheless, still the Countess's favourite,) affords some comfort to Matilda under her own grievances. Lady Norman is, however, looking forward to a source of consolation at present denied to the dowager;—a second generation being about to arise in the promised offspring of the Audleys. Ere long, Matilda will be attracted by new ties to the neighbourhood of Fern hill; and forget that to the fine young man who already commands there so large a share of popular favour, accusing reminiscences are attached, as, in his earlier though not happier days, imposed upon the acceptance of the world as the supposititious

HEIR OF SELWOOD.

FINIS.





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